

## A Raisin in the East

### African American Civil Rights Drama in GDR Scholarship and Theater Practice

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While the official image of the United States propagated in the GDR was that of a stronghold of political reaction and center of imperialist aggression, East German popular and intellectual images of America were more complex and diversified (cf. Schnoor 2001a, *passim*; Schnoor 2001b, *passim*). Based on Lenin's dictum that each society contains two cultures, a reactionary one and a progressive, proletarian, socialist culture (cf. Lenin 1960, 209), even the official political doctrine differentiated between the United States as the key embodiment of capitalist reaction and imperialism on the one hand and the American people as containing, besides the "bourgeois" mainstream, a second culture of oppressed masses on the other hand (cf. Schnoor 1999, 35; Schnoor 2001a, 936, 941–42).

As part of this "other America" considered to be in opposition to the dominant culture, African America enjoyed a certain political acceptability in GDR cultural politics, whereas the connection of black culture to America at large stirred the fascination of the East German people (cf. Schnoor 1999, 38–39; Schnoor 2001a, 940). The traditional socialist concern with the American "Negro question" but especially the African American struggle for political equality and social justice in the Black Civil Rights and Black Power movements moreover enabled artists and intellectuals in the GDR to critically and creatively approach black literature, music, politics, and scholarship within the framework of the state's socialist cultural policy (cf. Frenz and Hess 1973, 190).

Major African American novels, stories, and plays were published by leading GDR publishing houses (cf. Brüning 1980, 308–9; Frenz and Hess 1973, 189–92), and even more were discussed in scholarly studies. However, within the field of black drama, only a few plays connected to the ideas of the African American civil rights movement were given productions in East German theaters. Against the backdrop of Americanist scholarship as well as theater practice in the GDR, my essay will analyze the East German reception of the major two among these works: Lorraine Hansberry's 1959 play *A Raisin in the Sun* and James Baldwin's 1964 drama *Blues for Mister Charlie* (cf. Baldwin 1969, *passim*; Hansberry 1987, *passim*). Two lines of reception will form the pillars of my analysis: the scholarly

research of these works within GDR Americanist academic discourses in comparison with Western European and American scholars' assessments of the two plays on the one hand and the GDR stage productions of Hansberry's and Baldwin's dramas as well as their reception in the East German press on the other hand.

## GDR Americanist Scholarship

Since the late 1940s, American literature, linguistics, and civilization were researched and taught at seven universities in East Germany. While usually remaining a part of joined *Anglistik-Amerikanistik* programs, the field of American Studies evolved as a distinct and fully-fledged regional studies subject of research and teaching in the course of the 1960s. Throughout the existence of the socialist German state, Americanist scholarship operated under the premise of dealing with the culture(s) and society of the "class enemy" scholars and teachers were supposed to fight against. Since the late 1950s, institutional reforms and the radicalization of GDR cultural politics, especially the denunciation of nonrealist art, tightened the political grip on the East German academe; the erection of the Berlin Wall in 1961 further limited personal and institutional ties to the West (cf. Brüning 1999, 74–78; Schnoor 1999, 30–39; Schnoor 2001a, 932, 940–42). Ten years later, Erich Honecker's assumption of political power in 1971 was followed by a partial and limited liberalization of academic and cultural policy. Together with the American diplomatic recognition of the GDR in 1974, this new policy enabled the East German *Amerikanistik* to broaden its activities and partially break out of its isolation from the West (cf. Brüning 1999, 77–85; Schnoor 1999, 39–47; Schnoor 2001b, 775–79, 783–84).

East German Americanists responded to the political limitations of their field by emphasizing the difference between GDR *Amerikanistik* and Western American Studies in their writing, by stressing the integration of their discipline into Marxist-Leninist scholarship, and by underlining its role in strengthening the socialist state against Western imperialism. If the ideological race for advancement over capitalism was to be won, they argued, the East German populace had to know Western languages and cultures (cf. Brüning 1970, 177, 184; Hofmann 1960, 176, 183–84; Scheffel 1972, 371–73; Schönfelder 1959, 54). By constantly and explicitly invoking these causes in all public utterances, the GDR Americanists, consciously and deliberately or not, served the political system; yet without at least paying lip service to the rhetoric of the anti-imperialist struggle of the GDR, academic work on American literature and culture would have been impossible to carry out (cf. Brüning 1999, 73, 76). Sometimes, the critical appreciation of American literature in Soviet scholarship was put forth to justify the East German academic study of the field (cf. Manske 1974, *passim*; Riese 1985, *passim*).

Literary scholars largely concentrated on the one hand on the canonical works of "mainstream" American literature, drawing especially upon the theses, articulated first in Soviet scholarship, of America's democratic revolutionary beginnings or its progressive development during the nineteenth century. On the other

hand, GDR scholarly endeavors focused on the proletarian and leftist bourgeois writing as well as the social protest and ethnic minority literatures representing the "other America." Since the late 1960s, East German Americanists mapped new opportunities and directions for their work by arguing that their political function made it imperative to observe current developments in Western scholarship and American literature, and that the now higher developed socialist consciousness in the GDR enabled people to critically evaluate formerly rejected strains of literature (cf. Brüning 1970, 175–78, 184–85; Scheffel 1972, 373–75, 381, 386–87; Wirzberger 1968, *passim*; Wirzberger 1969, 343; see also Brüning 1999, 70–75; Neubauer 83; Schnoor 1999, 34–37).

The political situation during the Honecker era further allowed scholars to present a more differentiated image of the United States. Americanists increasingly reevaluated "bourgeois" writing, both established works and the emerging postmodernist literature. They emphasized the role of literature within a dialogic process of social communication or elements of nonconformism and progressive political critique within "mainstream" American letters (cf. Brüning 1980, 293–94, 318; Schönfelder 1984, 247–48; Weimann 1980, *passim*; see also Brüning 1999, 70–75; Neubauer 1997, 83–84, 101–6, 134–40; Schnoor 1999, 41–42). Nevertheless, as Rainer Schnoor observes, GDR Americanist scholarship failed to make full use of the possibilities the tentative political liberation offered them, especially during the 1970s (cf. Schnoor 1999, 42).

Owing to the importance accorded to the political struggles of African Americans, East German scholars presented black American culture as one of the central and most productive parts of the "other America." In their analyses of the black experience, GDR Americanists foregrounded the elements of social class struggle inherent in the black fight against slavery, segregation, and urban ghettoization, and they credited Marxist political consciousness alongside the example of African colonial liberation movements with the most formative influence on the African American civil rights and black power movements from the 1950s through the 1970s. In line with Marxist-Leninist doctrine, scholars praised these black political movements and their literary manifestations as such but scrutinized what was at odds with class consciousness. However, the way either "bourgeois" liberal or ethnic nationalist positions were scrutinized in the reading of African American writing revealed a nuanced assessment of black literature that was partially ahead of West German scholarship in the field (cf. Brüning 1970, 182–83; Brüning 1977, *passim*; Brüning 1980, 307–9; Frenz and Hess 189–92; Hajek 1978, *passim*; Hajek 1984, *passim*; Ihde 1975, *passim*; Ihde 1985, *passim*; Schönfelder and Wirzberger 141–48, 174–79, 410–15, 495–500; Wirzberger 1967, *passim*; Wirzberger 1968, 17–20; Wüstenhagen 1965, *passim*).

## American Drama in GDR Stage Repertory and Scholarship

Promoted by the American military administration in occupied Germany as a means of educating the German populace in the democratic tradition and

offering the much sought-after popular entertainment at the same time, American drama reentered the German stages only a few months after World War II. The increasing political tensions between the occupation powers soon led to a separate theater policy in the different occupation zones. East German theaters became state-owned venues operating under the control of the Soviet military administration and later the ministry of culture of the GDR. All employees were made subject to ministerial control; all seasonal repertoires as well as each play-script and the conceptualization for its *mise-en-scène* had to be submitted for approval to the ministry before rehearsals could begin (cf. Hammerthaler 1994, 163–210; Stuber 1998, 12–253).

Among the American plays available for productions in Germany, only those pieces considered politically relevant and pedagogically worthwhile remained in the repertory of the East German stages, a practice that was taken over into the GDR after the foundation of the state in 1949. These plays included especially socially critical drama written in a realist mode that met the thematic and formal tastes of the political decision makers as well as many spectators. Clifford Odets's *Golden Boy* (1937) or Arthur Miller's *All My Sons* (1947), for instance, were widely staged throughout East Germany, whereas productions of Eugene O'Neill's *Mourning Becomes Electra* (1931) in the late 1940s were received so poorly and scrutinized as nihilistic and decadent that the play was not restaged until the early 1970s (cf. Brüning 1959, 246–51, 258; Brüning 1983, 306–7; Frenz and Hess 1973, 182–89; Scheller 1975, n.p.).

Being part of the press, theater criticism was subjected to close political surveillance. To avoid censorship, reviewers tended to make judgments in conformity with cultural political directions: plays were expected to be evaluated for their capacity to promote socialist persuasions and behavior, and *mise-en-scènes* should articulate a productive commitment to the common good. Theater critics therefore had to argue for the partisan political value of a given production before they could positively assess aesthetic matters. Moreover, many of them understood themselves as partners of the playhouses rather than as mediators between theater and society. As a consequence, GDR drama criticism largely failed to carry the discourses dramatic productions inspired among audiences to a larger public beyond the playhouses (cf. Hammerthaler 220–24).

Owing to the more lenient political control of Americanist scholarly publications, the academic assessment of American drama in the GDR was ahead of theater practice and criticism. Drama had been playing a small but secure part in East German Americanist research and publishing projects, even though the two fields focused primarily on socially critical, especially explicitly leftist political plays (cf. Brüning 1980, 295–307, 310–13; Brüning 1983, 305–7; Frenz and Hess 1973, 172–82, 192–99; Schnoor 2001b, 778, 781). Both theater practice and Americanist drama scholarship profited considerably from the tentative liberalization of GDR cultural policy since the mid-1960s that allowed formerly rejected playwrights like Eugene O'Neill or Thornton Wilder as well as new "bourgeois" works, such as the plays of Neil Simon, to (re)enter university curricula and stage repertoires (cf. Brüning 1980, 314–18; Brüning 1983, 306–11; Frenz and Hess 1973, 186–89).

The scholarly reception of African American drama in the GDR mirrors the East German Americanist assessment of black literature in general: black writing from the United States was seen as almost unanimously a literature of protest, born out of the experience of racial exclusion and by necessity contributing to the ongoing African American political fight for freedom, equality, and "revolutionary" social change. GDR scholars primarily read the history of black drama as a struggle for an adequate representation of the black experience on an American stage that operates as capitalist enterprise and thus depends on catering to the tastes of white clients and sponsors. Tracing the development of African American "legitimate theater" and "serious" drama during the twentieth century, East German Americanists emphasized especially the role leftist white dramatists played in creating more "realistic" images of black life in their writing that replaced the traditional exoticizing representations of African Americans since the 1920s. Moreover, scholars noted the emerging tendency to dramatize actual political incidents, for instance the Scottsboro murder case indicted for its racist implications in Langston Hughes's *Scottsboro, Limited* (1931) and John Wexley's *They Shall Not Die* (1934) (cf. Brüning 1972, 46–48, 57–58; Brüning 1977, 214, 216f., 222–29).

Following World War II, GDR Americanists pointed out, the theater and drama of the "other America" entered a new stage, and now black drama was central to it as never before, as the black civil rights and black power movements of the 1950s and 1960s provided a strong impetus for an aesthetically innovative theater committed to a topical political cause. On the grounds of their racial experience, black writers were depicted in GDR scholarship as "writers of the people," as conscious educators and agitators of the black masses against racial discrimination and the capitalist exploitation of the black underclass. Employing a wide range of dramatic narrative forms, current African American drama was considered to follow along two major lines: on the one hand plays that sought to confront white America with its racism and articulating black determination to fight against it and on the other hand works which, by turning the gaze on black life itself, aimed to educate and strengthen the black community. While the former group of plays—most prominently the works of James Baldwin, Lorraine Hansberry, and Alice Childress—particularly scrutinized self-appointed white liberals for lacking the will to radical action against racism, the latter set of dramas tended to critique moderate, assimilationist segments of the black populace for striving for white acceptance and middle-class respectability. The simplified reversed racial binaries of much theater affiliated with the black power and black arts movements cut across the communist doctrines of the primacy of the class struggle and of international socialist solidarity across racial or national lines. Echoing their Marxist-Leninist assessment of African American writing at large, East German scholars accordingly criticized the black nationalist tendencies inherent especially in the black Revolutionary Theater of Amiri Baraka / LeRoi Jones and the Street Theater of Ed Bullins (cf. Brüning 1972, 51–57; Brüning 1977, 223–24, 245–48; Hajek 1977, 257–58; Hajek 1978, 113–14, 117–18; Hajek 1984, 31–36, 90–92; Schönfelder and Wirzberger 1977, 495–500).

## Black Civil Rights Drama on Stage and Page: *A Raisin in the Sun* and *Blues for Mister Charlie*

Given these political inhibitions against black nationalism, it is no surprise that the two African American plays receiving the greatest attention in GDR scholarship articulated a rather liberal, racial integrationist position: Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959) and James Baldwin's 1964 drama *Blues for Mister Charlie* (1964). These were also the only black-authored dramas to be produced professionally on the East German stage (cf. Brüning 1980, 317; Brüning 1983, 310; Frenz and Hess 1973, 191–92). *A Raisin in the Sun* had already written theater history in the United States as one of the longest-running black-authored works on Broadway, the first play by a black woman to be produced there, and the first drama by an African American to win the prestigious New York Drama Critics' Circle Award.

Hansberry's realist family drama depicts the lives and dreams of the members of a poor African American family in Chicago's black Southside community, as they await the life insurance money from their deceased patriarch Walter Lee Younger Sr. Committed to offering her family a better life, Walter Lee's widow, Lena, intends to use the money to buy a house in a "better"—and white-populated—neighborhood, for which she already paid a deposit, as well as to enable her daughter Beneatha to study medicine. Beneatha herself wants to go to Africa with her Nigerian boyfriend Joseph after medical school. Her brother Walter Lee Jr., a chauffeur, dreams of his own car and liquor store to gain independence from white employers and a higher social standing as a black patriarch in the African American community, whereas his pregnant wife, Ruth, supports the plans of her mother-in-law. When Karl Lindner, a representative of the white neighborhood, offers the Youngers a large sum of money if they abandon the plan to move there, Walter Lee is tempted to agree, as his plans for the liquor store have been thwarted and he is now in debt. However, realizing that accepting the money would turn him into an accomplice of the white dominance over black lives and black dignity he and his family try to escape from, he rejects the offer, and the play ends with the Youngers being about to move to their new home (cf. Hansberry 1987, *passim*).

Conflicts arise among the family members in particular from the diverging concepts that underlie their different plans for the use of the insurance money: the desire for racial integration clashes with housing segregation and the claim to a place in white America with both the struggle for social rise within the black community and a pan-African consciousness that seeks a future for black Americans in Africa. Lena and Ruth's "motherly" concern with the living conditions of the entire family is set against Walter Lee's striving for individual "male" respectability, and the dream of material success against that of universal human dignity. Taken from a line of Langston Hughes's poem "Harlem" (1951)—"What happens to a dream deferred? / Does it dry up / like a raisin in the sun? / . . . / or does it explode?" (quoted in full in Hansberry 1987, 5)—, the title of the drama powerfully

captures the situation of the Younger family as representatives of civil rights-era black America that was growing ever more restless to realize its dream of a life in human dignity, social equality, and material security.

*A Raisin in the Sun* met with critical praise on both sides of the Atlantic, especially among white liberals, but was also harshly criticized for its racially integrationist perspective. Especially, the play's ending with the Younger family moving into a white neighborhood was widely perceived to be catering to (black and white) bourgeois sensibilities, and radical black intellectuals scrutinized the playwright as supporting the white power system (cf., for example, Bigsby 1985, 274; Breiting 1976, 154–56; Brüning 1977, 230–33; Hajek 1977, 258–60; Hajek 1984, 32). Scholarly analyses of the drama generally pointed out its racial political context but also its concern with the struggle for personal dignity independent of color lines. American and Western European Americanists from the 1960s through the 1980s tended to foreground the psychological implications of the characters' individual choices, their striving for social rise, and the typological and artificial qualities of the play (cf. Ashley 1990, 151–52; Bigsby 1985, 381–85; Breiting 1976, 154, 156–66; Scanlan 1978, 196–200; Sollors 1978, 139–42).

In contrast to them, GDR scholars not only stressed the working-class setting of the play and the elements of social class conflict the drama addresses but also put particular emphasis on the wider disruptive political potential of *A Raisin in the Sun* (cf. Brüning 1977, 233–35; Brüning 1980, 309; Hajek 1977, 259–63; Hajek 1978, 111–13; Hajek 1984, 32–34; Schönfelder and Wirzberger 1977, 495; Wirzberger 1968, 19). In doing this, they prefigured the Western reassessment of Hansberry's drama since the 1980s as being more radical in its political assumptions than many formally and thematically less conventional and "bourgeois" works from the black arts period (cf. Baraka 1987, *passim*; Nemiroff 1987, ix–xiv; Wilkerson 2001, 40–47).

As Friederike Hajek pointed out, *A Raisin in the Sun* establishes connections to viewers' own lives. By calling especially white spectators to rethink their personal actions with regard to the rights and dignity of their black fellow citizens, she argued, the piece becomes particularly relevant for and more easily accessible to the largely white East German audiences. When the action breaks off at the end of the drama,

it immediately links up to life, is brought further and to an end in a way by spectators in their daily life practice; because the African American family moving out here (in the theater) in fact directly moves toward them, the (white) spectators. Hereby, play and reality finally and immediately confront each other, and the play becomes potentially productive in the mediation of an alternative society. (Hajek 1978, 112, translation mine; cf. also Hajek 1977, 261)

Hajek moreover contended that, rather than subscribing to the American dream of material success, Hansberry's characters come to gain self-esteem and mutual respect by interrogating this myth, and the drama's Broadway success allowed

the play to challenge American mainstream society from within one of its most established cultural institutions (cf. Hajek 1977, 259–63; also Brüning 1977, 233–34; Hajek 1978, 111–13; Hajek 1984, 32–34).

In a similar vein, Eberhard Brüning read *A Raisin in the Sun* as centrally depicting the interconnection between racial and class struggle:

As the personal decision [of Walter Lee to reject Karl Lindner's offer] and the character development in their preconditions and effects are in a close relationship to fundamental social problems, they step out of the narrow individual realm and become representative of the black proletarian masses in the U.S.A. per se. (Brüning 1977, 234, translation mine)

He further argued that the decision of the Youngers to move to a “better” and “white” neighborhood already antagonistic to them represents an act of determination to fight, which explicitly sets the play in the context of the wider African American political struggle. Not bourgeois black respectability but challenging a social system based on (informal) racial segregation and racialized class difference is what *A Raisin in the Sun* fights for (cf. Brüning 1977, 233ff.; Brüning 1980, 309; also Hajek 1977, 262f.; Schönfelder and Wirzberger 495). Moreover, by depicting Karl Lindner not as the stereotype of a white racist, as similar figures were often portrayed in many “radical” African American plays from the period, but as a “well-meaning citizen who is willing to negotiate [. . .]” Brüning wrote, the “inhumanity and amorality of his concern are shown in their true light” (Brüning 1977, 234, translation mine).

At the same time as the drama is linked to the black civil rights movement, GDR Americanists emphasized the fact that *A Raisin in the Sun* addresses the issues of universal human dignity and material living conditions in a manner that transcends the racial political realm to include elements of social class conflict imperative to a critical appreciation of American literature in East German scholarship. Friederike Hajek tellingly argued:

The appellative and even suggestive effect of Hansberry's play is *not* based on a pronounced black-white confrontation but on the author's presenting the specific racial problem in its at first generally human perspective as a problem of (coincidentally black) people that seek to realize their claim to a dignified existence. (Hajek 1978, 112, translation mine, emphasis in the original; cf. also Brüning 1977, 233f.; Schönfelder and Witzberger 495)

And “especially in Lena's, the Black Mama's, becoming the Great American Mama to audiences, including the white ones among them, lies the extraordinary artistic achievement” (Hajek 1977, 260, translation mine) of *A Raisin in the Sun*.

Mounted at East Berlin's Maxim-Gorki-Theater under the direction of Hans-Dieter Mäde for the celebration of “World Theater Day” on March 28, 1963, Hansberry's play received favorable reviews from East Germany's theater critics. Although they scrutinized the drama for its sentimental moments and “bourgeois”



political orientation, the reviewers almost unanimously praised *A Raisin in the Sun* for scrutinizing white American racism and black capitalist business dreams as well as for ending on an optimistic, politically activist note (cf. Ebert-Obermeier 1963; Funke 1963; Gersch 1963; Kerndl 1963; Nössing 1963; *Sehnsucht* 1963).<sup>1</sup> As Elvira Mollenschott noted in *Neues Deutschland*: “Even though the author does not yet clearly show the way that leads to ultimate liberation—the optimistic tone, the conviction that people will learn to let their good dreams come true cannot be overheard” (Mollenschott, translation mine).

Anticipating Eberhard Brüning’s argumentation, the reviewer for the *Neue Zeit* applauded *A Raisin in the Sun* for unmasking both capitalism and pan-Africanism as illusions: “Wanting to become rich does not help the poor Negro. The romantic flight to the African past does not help. Only the fight for equal rights helps, and this fight for equality goes together with the [fight] for better living conditions” (*Was aus Träumen wird* 1971, translation mine). And like GDR Americanists later, Peter Edel’s review in *BZ am Abend* emphasized the universal appeal of the drama and its suitability for reception in a white-populated Socialist European country:

That the plot of this play is set among Negroes only aggravates the general validity of the conflicts of the Younger Family, only elucidates that the author Lorraine Hansberry wants to not only denounce racial discrimination in the U.S.A. but also, hereby posing the class question at the same time, but also illustrate the hardships of many thousands of such “ordinary people” dreaming in the capitalist world—whether of black or white skin color. (Edel, translation mine)

The contemporary international political agenda also informed the second GDR production of Hansberry’s piece, a Sorbian version staged by Beno Sram with the Deutsch-Sorbisches Volkstheater, which premiered on May 5, 1971, at the Bautzener Kammerbühne. The theater program provided the East German audiences with political background information, including photographs and texts pertaining to the later phase of the black civil rights movement in the United States. The reprint of Langston Hughes’s “Harlem” poem next to a photograph of the Lincoln Memorial on the Washington Mall further put both the play and the civil rights movement into the larger historical context of the African American “deferred dream” of political and material equality since slavery and emancipation. And an image of contemporary black poverty, accompanied by a quote from Lenin, finally connects the American racial conflict to the global socialist concern with class struggle (cf. *Rózynka w s»óncu* 1971, passim). By proclaiming that “with this *mise-en-scène*, the Bautzen artists also confess their solidarity with Angela Davis” (*Was aus Träumen wird* 1971, translation mine), the reviewer for the *Nationalzeitung* even tied the production to the most topical global leftist affair of the day, the international campaign to free Davis, an African American leftist political activist, from political imprisonment in the United States.

The reception of James Baldwin's *Blues for Mister Charlie* in East German media and scholarship was more complex than the perception of Hansberry's drama. Inspired by the brutal murders of Emmett Till, a black boy, and the black civil rights activist Medgar Evers, the play captures the moment of budding militancy in the fight for African American equality through depicting how a racially mixed but segregated small town in the South deals with a racial murder, its aftermath, and the ensuing trial. The drama tells the story of Richard Henry, a black minister's son recently returned from a long stay in the North, who is shot by the poor white store owner Lyle Britten for allegedly attempting to rape his wife. Using a free form which integrates numerous flashback scenes to unravel the events that lead to the murder, *Blues for Mister Charlie* explores the racial attitudes prevailing in American society and elucidates the socioeconomic and psychic anxieties that underlie them: Lyle's blunt racism here mixes with his fear of social decline, and Richard's provocative rebelliousness as an end in itself is scrutinized while the rightness of his claim to racial equality is put forward. In a similar manner, the play reveals how the liberal racial attitude of the white journalist Parnell James is firmly grounded in both his secure economic position and in the moderate political agenda of the local black civil rights activists: once Lyle is acquitted in court and the African American community turns to a more radical political agenda and strategy in their fight for civil rights, Parnell's belief in a smooth racial rapprochement process is suddenly challenged, and he is forced to decide between the loyalty to his white friends and the black political cause he wants to support (cf. Baldwin 1969, *passim*).

Blending elements of agit-prop theater and psychological realism, Baldwin's drama was received controversially along both racial and ideological lines in the United States as well as abroad. *Blues for Mister Charlie* premiered in the GDR at the Großes Haus of the Volkstheater Rostock, directed by Hanns Anselm Perten, on January 11, 1969. Only three months later, the play was staged to open the Kellertheater Leipzig on April 13, 1969, under the direction of Karl Kayser. The programs of both productions contextualized the drama for its East German spectators through essays on African American history and the civil rights movement, on Baldwin, his play, and on the blues as a genre of black protest music. In the Rostock program, explicit connections were established between the social pressures of capitalism and white American racism, presenting the former as offering a fertile ground for the latter. A text on African American communism here and a quote by Bertolt Brecht on the black political struggle in the Leipzig playbill further connected the African American civil rights movement to international socialist concerns (cf. Perten 1969, *passim*; *Blues* 1969, *passim*). The Leipzig production was further flanked by a series of well-received "club talks," in which spectators could discuss the play with theater practitioners involved in the production and scholars (cf. *Diskussion um "Blues"* 1969; Brüning 1980, 317; Brüning 1983, 310).

Writing in the Rostock program, Karl-Heinz Schönfelder poignantly captures what were to become the main lines of the critical and scholarly reception of Baldwin's play in the GDR:

[*Blues for Mister Charlie*] is characterized by its militant message as well as the author's deep understanding of social contexts [. . .]. Although Richard's individual rebellion remains unsuccessful, resignation and despair do not dominate here. Baldwin rather shows an alternative and a perspective: the organized battle of the Negroes within the Civil Rights movement. He especially lets the colored minister recognize that this battle must be led no longer with the Holy Scriptures but with the Bible AND with arms. The optimistic basic tendency of the drama is enforced by the ending, in which Baldwin lets the white liberal [. . .] find his way to the Negroes. He [. . .] hereby indicates for the first time that he considers a coalition of colored people and progressive white forces possible and desirable. *Blues for Mister Charlie* bespeaks Baldwin's having gained considerable insight in the nature and function of the machinery of state power in the South of the U.S.A. (Schönfelder 1969, n.p.)

Like *A Raisin in the Sun*, *Blues for Mister Charlie* met with favorable reviews in the GDR press. While some theater critics complained about the political limits of the drama they attributed to Baldwin's ignorance of "the world-changing power of socialism" (Antosch, translation mine), reviewers echoed Schönfelder's assessment of the play in praising its political critique of white racism and support of black civil rights activism. As Jürgen Grambow put it in *Der Demokrat*, Baldwin's drama "introduced us to the intellectual climate which enabled the unpunished murder of a president, a presidential candidate, and a Nobel laureate within a brief period of time [and] the daily humiliation and physical threat to thousands of colored citizens" (Grambow 1969, translation mine). Reviewing the play for *Neues Deutschland*, Rainer Kerndl argued that, with *Blues for Mister Charlie*, "Baldwin becomes an unambiguous fighter against racial discrimination" (Kerndl 1969, translation mine). In line with communist doctrine, the GDR theater critics particularly hailed the play for its depiction of the white racists as complex characters and for its ending with a racially integrationist vision that retained a place for progressive whites within the black political movement (cf. Bankel 1969; Funke 1969; Grambow 1969; Kerndl 1969; Krecek 1969; Zelt 1969, 25). The reviewers praised the two productions for turning what they considered a compromising work of bourgeois consciousness into an artistic and social experience: the emphasis on the aspects of class struggle inherent in the drama in Rostock and Leipzig, they argued, met the aesthetic and political expectations of their Marxist-educated GDR audiences, and by foregrounding Parnell's role as an identification figure for white supporters of the black political struggle, the two productions underlined the relevance of an African American play to the East German Socialist experience (cf. Antosch 1969; *Blues als Protestsong* 1969; *Diskussion um "Blues"* 1969; Kerndl 1969; Krecek 1969; Zelt 1969, passim).

Many reviews stressed the impact of the theatrical mise-en-scènes in Rostock and Leipzig in conveying the African American experience to GDR audiences. Stylized sets, costumes, and make-up not only avoided the pitfall of blackface performance by the all-white casts—an aspect that Bernhard Scheller would

later foreground in his scholarly analysis of the two productions (cf. Scheller 1977, 258–59)—but also visualized the political aspect of *Blues for Mister Charlie*. According to the critics, especially the use of black gloves to identify the African American characters in Rostock interacting powerfully with the backdrop image of the final scene of the production, the widely medialized documentary footage of Tommy Smith's and John Carlos's raising their fists in support of the black power movement during their victory ceremony at the 1968 Mexico City Olympics. Through this reference, reviewers argued, the black gloves of the players extended the function of a dramaturgically necessary racial marker to signify "the accumulating resistance of the black U.S. citizens" (Kerndl 1969, translation mine; cf. also Grambow 1969; Rieger 1969; Timm 1969; Zelt 1969, 28).

In Leipzig, the actors wore gloves and white facial masks, respectively, to identify the black and white characters in the play. The use of ghost-like "tooth-paste-white" (Krecek; translation mine) masks to visualize whiteness reversed the tradition of white blackface performance and hereby signified upon its racist implications. Moreover, it served as an alienation device, whereas the natural—and white—facial appearance of the black characters facilitated audiences' identification with the black American experience. As Werner Krecek wrote in the *Leipziger Volkszeitung*: "Thus, the Negro figures are brought closer to the spectator [whereas] their opponents are given a typological character" (Krecek 1969, translation mine; cf. also Antosch 1969; *Blues als Protestsong* 1969; Funke 1969).

Reviewers of the Rostock version further hailed the way the mise-en-scène reinforced the class-focused interpretation of Baldwin's race drama. "By refraining from using Negro masks," Jürgen Grambow wrote, "the director reveals the deeper nature of racial discrimination: it is part of the social sphere [and] thus finally a class question" (Grambow 1969, translation mine). And Rainer Kerndl pointed out the political function of the costumes: While all black characters unanimously wore blue jeans and white T-shirts—clothes then associated with physical labor—, "the suits and costumes of the whites, kept equally uniform, indicated their better social position" (Kerndl 1969, translation mine; cf. also Timm 1969).

The East German reviewers especially scrutinized the psychological explanations and sexual undertones of *Blues for Mister Charlie*. While Christoph Funke noted Baldwin's concern with the psychological bases for white racism in the United States in a neutral tone in his review of the Leipzig version (cf. Funke 1969), several critics applauded the "justified strong reduction of erotic motives for the actions of the figures" (*Blues als Protestsong* 1969, translation mine) in both GDR productions, which strengthened the politically desired element of "active solidarity with the rightless" (Zelt 1969, 26, translation mine) of Baldwin's drama. In Rostock, Rainer Kerndl argued, "for instance in the figure of Richard, the references to his drug and sexual experiences were reduced; important here is the young man who has decided to no longer turn the other cheek but to hit back" (Kerndl 1969, translation mine).

Reviewing the Rostock production in the West German *Frankfurter Rundschau*, Manfred Rieger critically evaluated the political bent of the mise-en-scène and its pitfalls: While "it was foreseeable that racial differences were

comprehended in Rostock as class differences" (Rieger 18), the "tame" representation of the character of Richard through the suppression of the sexual psychological elements of Baldwin's text seriously limited the political militancy the production aspired. As Rieger admitted, the Rostock version nevertheless positively differed from previous West German and Austrian productions of the drama, which had "resulted in emptiness and resignation, as the Black Power consequence was received with reservation" (ibid. 18).

Most scholarly evaluations of Baldwin's play stressed the interconnectedness of the personal and collective experiences in *Blues for Mister Charlie* as well as how racism shapes and threatens humanity on either side of the color line. Yet, Western scholarship from the 1960s through the 1980s tended to criticize both the sentimental and agit-prop-like qualities of the drama as well as its militant racial political agenda (cf., for example, Bigsby 1985, 387–91; Bruck 1975, 74–94; Macebuh 1973, 172; Schwank 170–83). Echoing the GDR press reviews of the Rostock and Leipzig productions of *Blues for Mister Charlie*, East German Americanists praised the social political critique of the play and its use of documentary and agit-prop elements (cf. Brüning 1977, 243; Hajek 1978, 114–15; Hajek 1984, 35–36; Scheller 1975, n.p.; Scheller 1977, 258–64). Friederike Hajek stressed that "the confrontation of black and white masses is a new element in African American drama which took the counter-public as it emerged through the civil rights movement into account" (Hajek 1978, 115, translation mine). She went on to suggest that, with this mode of presentation, *Blues for Mister Charlie* points to the relevance of the social class struggle for the African American movement: "Baldwin refers to the fact that the relations between black and white individuals in the U.S.A. are determined by social conditions far more complex than the 'color line' or the racial barrier and which urgently need a fundamental change" (ibid., 115, translation mine). As Bernhard Scheller wrote, the two GDR productions did particular justice to the "necessary conclusion" from the historically materialist "recognition" (Scheller 1977, 264, translation mine; cf. also ibid., 258–64) of the class struggle underlying the racial conflict of *Blues for Mister Charlie*. In line with the Marxist doctrine of interracial solidarity of progressive forces, Scheller, Hajek, and other East German scholars further followed GDR theater reviewers in emphasizing the importance of Baldwin's at least somewhat differentiated picture of white American society—especially in the character of Parnell, the key identification figure for liberal white audiences—and its optimistic conclusion with the hope for an ongoing joint black and white fight against racism (cf. Brüning 1977, 244; Hajek 1978, 114–15; Hajek 1984, 35–36; Scheller 1977, 251, 258–64).

The East German academic reception of the play occurred in the context of a larger scholarly uneasiness about Baldwin's work. The perception of his novels, essays, and plays in the GDR was marred until the 1970s by the apparently apolitical stand of the writer and his "bourgeois" psychological and sexual explanations for the actions and attitudes of his fictional characters (cf. Frenz and Hess 1973, 192). In an analysis of Baldwin's essays and novels, Heinz Wüstenhagen, for instance, reproached the writer's "reduction of his characters to the sexual sphere" through which his "subjectivism and individualism" (Wüstenhagen 1965,

155, translation mine) manifested themselves. It is this “philosophical-aesthetic modernism,” Wüstenhagen concluded, “[. . .] which finally both neutralizes and paralyzes the social critical aspects” (ibid., 157, translation mine; cf. also Brüning 1980, 308) of Baldwin’s work. GDR Americanist assessments grew more balanced and appreciative when Baldwin became more explicitly political in his literary writing and public commentary, especially after he wrote a widely publicized open letter to the imprisoned Angela Davis in 1970 (cf. Brüning 1980, 308; Schönfelder and Wirzberger 1977, 413–14; see also Frenz and Hess 1973, 192). Nevertheless, in his review of an East German scholarly edition of Baldwin essays, Hans-Jochen Sander criticized the “complicated blending of recognized social laws and psychologizing, individualist conceptualizations” (quoted in Brüning 1980, 308, translation mine) of their author.

Like the GDR theater critics, East German Americanists found particular fault with the sexual-psychological explanations of white racism in *Blues for Mister Charlie*. Eberhard Brüning criticized that Baldwin, as he saw it, presented a white male sexual inferiority complex as the origin of antiblack racism in the United States. The drama, he claimed,

reveals the fragility of the material as well as the intellectual claim to power of the white middle-class world but attempts to shift what is concretely socially motivated to what is sexually psychological and to shock the white middle-class as incarnation of the impotence of a whole race and civilization whose only way out is brutality and terror. (Brüning 1972, 5, translation mine; cf. also Brüning 1970, 184; Brüning 1980, 317)

Consequentially, Brüning and other GDR scholars hailed the reduction of psychological interpretations and sexual references in their discussion of the two East German stage productions of the drama. As Bernhard Scheller wrote, “the reduction of the sexual psychological element [. . .] proved to be an enlargement of the play, which does justice to the conceptual concern to show active solidarity with the rightless” (Scheller 1977, 262–63, translation mine; cf. also ibid., 258–64). And according to Brüning, “only a sensitive and consequentially Marxist-Leninist *mise-en-scène*—such as the one by Karl Kayser at the Leipzig ‘Kellertheater’—can, by cutting the hypertrophy of the sex-related vocabulary, lead toward the actual social basic concern of the play and turn it ‘into an artistic and social experience at once’” (Brüning 1970, 184, translation mine).

In line with the generally changing attitudes of East German Americanists to Baldwin’s works in the 1970s, Karl-Heinz Schönfelder and Karl-Heinz Wirzberger, on the other hand, argued that *Blues for Mister Charlie* “refers to sexuality only to the degree to which it is necessary for a comprehensive characterization of the characters and social conditions” (Schönfelder and Wirzberger 1977, 413, translation mine). But even this more differentiated assessment crucially missed the point of the meaning of Richard’s sexual affairs for the play: Baldwin’s drama evokes the black man’s sexual adventures with white women to scrutinize the racist double standard of white men, which rejects black male–white female

miscegenation and grants white men full sexual access to black women. Rather than deflecting from the subject of the black political struggle, as the East German scholars saw it, Richard's affairs function here as an act of black male resistance to a sexualized system of racial hierarchy. The black power movement of the 1960s even propagated the claim to black male equality through the (sexual) "possession" of white women that had been denied to African American men under Jim Crow laws in the American South (cf. Hine and Jenkins 1999, 38–39).

Western intellectuals and political activists sympathetic to the black power movement have often failed to acknowledge the fact that this practice precisely mirrors the equally racialized and sexist notion of white masculinity through the "availability" of black mistresses it claims to undermine (cf. Hine and Jenkins 1999, 38–39). In contrast to them, GDR Americanists and theater reviewers rightfully criticized the cynic misogyny of Richard's self-definition through his past sexual affairs with white women in the North. However, they dismissed the political implications of both Richard's boasting of his interracial sexual adventures and Lyle's murderous reaction to Richard's macho role play on the grounds of Baldwin's lack of Socialist class consciousness. This pinpoints to yet ultimately fails to articulate the crucial difference between the African American civil rights movement on the one hand and the Marxist-Leninist concern with class conflicts on the other: where Baldwin's drama explicitly cuts across social class lines—especially the group of white characters, including both poor men like Lyle and modestly wealthy ones like Parnell—in its depiction of the central, racial political conflict between blacks and whites, the East German reception of the play fiercely struggled with and fundamentally failed in pressing *Blues for Mister Charlie* into the scheme of a social class struggle between black workers and their white capitalist oppressors that was politically demanded in both theater criticism and scholarship in the GDR.

## Conclusion

Americanist research in the GDR moved between the poles of political doctrine demanding ideological distance to its subject of study and the personal freedom of the inventive scholar. Lenin's doctrine of the two cultures not only provided a framework for the appropriation and appreciation of ever-growing segments of American literature but also led East German scholarship to often-pioneering treatments of aspects of American culture neglected to a smaller or larger degree in Western Americanist studies. The political limitations and performance of conformity of GDR Americanists become obvious most prominently in their standard framing of the United States as an imperialist power, their depiction of African American political consciousness in terms of anticolonial and class struggles, and in the emphasis they placed on interracial solidarity of "progressive" forces. Reading between the lines of the Marxist-Leninist standard formulae, East German scholars dealt with American, especially African American, literature in a similarly differentiated manner as their Western colleagues operating under much less restrictive political conditions.

Advocating the fight against black political and economic inequality without rejecting white America altogether, African American literature connected to the black civil rights movement of the 1950s and early 1960s. It also offered itself for a political perception that could connect the struggle against racial discrimination with a socialist emphasis on class conflict. Embodying the black civil rights movement's agenda of racially integrationist activism and touching upon the black American economic struggle in a model manner, Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* and James Baldwin's *Blues for Mister Charlie* tellingly remained the only African American stage plays from this era to be produced on professional stages in the GDR. Given the limitations placed especially upon theater practitioners and critics, East German stage productions and press reviews provided a comparatively differentiated reading of the two works. Hansberry's and Baldwin's dramas moreover featured prominently among the black plays of the period GDR Americanists addressed in their writing, which, corresponding to the greater freedom they enjoyed, usually exceeded the stage productions and press reviews in complexity and depth. As time has shown, these scholarly interpretations have proven their validity alongside the perceptions Western academics have offered.

## Note

1. Except for Manfred Zelt's review of Baldwin's drama, all press reviews and theater programs pertaining to the GDR productions of *A Raisin in the Sun* and *Blues for Mister Charlie* quoted here have been retrieved from the productions' clipping/program files at the Stiftung Archiv der Akademie der Künste, Berlin.

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