



FACULTY OF ARTS
OF CHARLES UNIVERSITY
IN PRAGUE



Department of Anglophone Literatures and Cultures

Supervisor's Report:

Ondej Polák, "Between Art and Politics: The Disunity of Black Drama during the Harlem Renaissance," BA thesis

Choice of Topic:

The subject area of this thesis is an adventurous one for a BA level project. The thesis attempts to map the two main trajectories of Black drama in the 1920s and 1930s with reference to the ideas of William Edward Burghardt Du Bois and Alain LeRoy Locke and a selection of plays from that era. Such a subject area requires considerable research effort to locate both primary and secondary materials, and Mr Polák has competently covered a great deal of ground.

Thesis statement / aims and objectives:

While the historical frame of the project is well described, the introductory chapter the purpose and hypothesis of the thesis as a whole might have been more explicitly articulated. Evidently, what is of interest are questions of (racial self-) definition alongside complex issues concerning art and politics. As Mr Polák states, "the problem of defining black drama on American stages, would lead to disunity among the leading African American scholars and playwrights during the 1920s and 30s, years known in relation to African American culture as the Harlem Renaissance." Although it is a difficult question to broach, it might have been worth addressing the expectation that aesthetic unity might ever have been possible or desirable. That said, the general objective of the work is to describe and analyse selected examples of plays from the Protest School of drama and the Art-Theatre School in order to contrast their practices. The thesis goes a good way towards elaborating some of the contextual factors at work and addresses some of the conceptual issues that are embedded in the plays.

Structure and development:

The organization of the thesis is logical and coherently realised. In chapter two Mr Polák provides a clear outline of the contrasting ideas of W.E.B. DuBois and Alain Locke with some apt illustrative quotations. A strong point in the chapter is the recognition that while their methods and attitudes differed, their goal of "equal status for African Americans, both on and off the stage" was a shared one. Chapters three and four then move on to analysis of specific works from the Protest School and the Art Theatre School. In these chapters Mr Polák has identified, located and discussed works that are rarely read by postgraduate students never mind undergraduates. The plays provide an interesting and diverse picture of the range of topics and methods that animated African American writing for performance during the period. While discussion of these plays in both chapters somewhat lacks a sense of the reception of the works (either at the time or later), Mr Polák is alert to the main aesthetic and political agendas these works engage with, in a broad way. The balance of discussion tips towards description; ideally some more critical analysis would be desirable across the two core chapters.



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Research:

The research undertaken for this project is commendable for a BA work. Mr Polák demonstrates a strong sense of research initiative; has assembled a good bibliography and an interesting and varied dramatic corpus.

Use of sources:

The use of secondary sources is generally clear and stylistically well framed. Some ideas are investigated and integrated. Research materials have been cited appropriately throughout. Well done.

Stylistics and language:

The register of the work is somewhat informal. There are minor language errors: for instance, occasional sentence fragments, frequent use of the word “and” to begin sentences. Otherwise, Mr Polák’s writing style is clear.

Format:

Despite minor punctuation errors, the thesis demonstrates consistent use of appropriate format.

I recommend the thesis for defence and propose to grade the work “VERY GOOD” / 2.

26.8.2016

Doc. Clare Wallace, PhD