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UM DEPARTMENT OF THEATRE
Daniel MacLean Wagner, Producing Director Present

The Amen Corner
By James Baldwin

Director
Walter Dallas

Scenic Designer
Tanna Peters

Lighting Designer
Harold F. Burgess II

Costume Designer
Kathleen Geldard

Sound Designer
Kevin Alexander

Vocal Coach/Choral Director
Jonathan Ball

Dramaturgs
Douglas A. Jones, Jr.
Laurence Zoll

April 27 - May 6, 2006

ROBERT AND ARLENE KOGOD THEATRE
Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center
University of Maryland
Three years after completing his first novel, Go Tell It On The Mountain, James Baldwin saw his play, The Amen Corner, first premiered at Howard University. It ran for just four performances: May 11 – 14, 1955. It would take another ten years before the play would reach the professional stage. As Baldwin wrote, "Writing The Amen Corner I remember as a desperate and even rather irresponsible act ... the American theatre was not exactly clamoring for plays on obscure aspects of Negro life ..."

By the time The Amen Corner reached Broadway in 1965 — it ran for 84 performances, from April 4-June 26, 1965 — America was in the middle of a period of great change and turmoil. Just two weeks before the play opened at the Ethel Barrymore Theatre, President Lyndon B. Johnson delivered a famous speech imploring Congress to pass the Voting Rights Act; this bill, which removed the requirement for would-be voters to take a literacy test, was signed into law August 6, 1965. Earlier in 1965, Malcolm X was assassinated at the Audubon Ballroom in Harlem. However, it was the decade in which the play was written and is set that laid the seeds that bloomed into the tumultuous 1960s.

In May of 1954, the Supreme Court unanimously decided in the Brown v. Board decision that a "separate but equal" doctrine was unconstitutional: thereby, ostensibly, desegregating public schools. In August of 1955, Emmett Till, a fourteen year-old African American, was brutally lynched for "whistling a white woman." In 1957, Congress passed and President Eisenhower signed the Civil Rights Act of 1957, the first enacted piece of civil rights legislation since Reconstruction. These events, among many others, sparked the American civil rights movement.

Of course it is impossible to regard The Amen Corner outside of its historical context. Set in Harlem, when new a Frigidaire cost $439.95 and roundtrip train fare from New York City to Philadelphia cost $6.12, this play depicts one of those "obscure aspects" of African American life in the mid-1950s, the Pentecostal Church. After a post-World II wave of migration by African Americans from the South to the North, churches started to appear on virtually every other corner in Harlem. Many of these churches were Pentecostal. Contrary to most doctrine espoused by the black church, these Pentecostal churches were often founded and pastored by women. These women, like Sister Margaret, who sat atop the hierarchy of the church dictated to their members the proper way to live and the proper way to salvation.

There was another lifestyle, however, on display in Harlem at the time: that of jazz culture. With clubs like Minton's Playhouse, the Savoy and the Cotton Club, young people, like David, found instant gratification in the music, whether it was artistic or carnal. This gratification caused great friction between them and "church folk."

The Amen Corner explores just that and much more. Coming out of the ritual of the church, this grippingly lyrical play attests to, as Baldwin wrote, "the communion which is the theatre." Like Sister Margaret, Baldwin wants his audience to "gain the keys to the kingdom. The kingdom is love, and love is selfless, although only the self can lead one there."

-Douglas A. Jones, Jr.
M.A. candidate in Theatre and Performance Studies