

## LITERARY Meditations

By Dr. Brenda M. Greene

Richard wesley, Playwright and Screenwriter

Greetings Friends and Colleagues,

Welcome to the fourth edition of Literary Meditations, a newsletter reflecting my thoughts on writers and their work. Literary Meditations provides a preview of my book project which contextualizes the interviews that I have conducted with Black writers throughout the African diaspora on the radio show and podcast Writers on Writing. In this issue, I feature Richard Wesley, the award-winning American dramatist whose work represents a cultural history of Black America from the Civil Rights era to the present.

### About Richard Wesley

Richard Wesley is a playwright and screenwriter whose work has been produced on stage and for screen and television. He is the author of *The Richard Wesley Play Anthology* (2015) and a memoir *It's Always Loud in the Balcony: A Life in Black Theater, from Harlem to Hollywood and Back* (2019). His screenplays and television dramas include *Uptown Saturday Night*; *Let's Do It Again*; and *Mandela and de Kler*. Wesley wrote the Pulitzer prize winning libretto for Anthony Davis's opera *The Central Park Five* and his awards include the NAACP Image Award and the AUDELCO. He is an associate professor at New York University's Tisch School of the Arts.

### Richard Wesley on Memory and Writing

My memories are a great foundation to build on and I remind myself that it's okay to go there as long as I don't live there.

It was 1972; I was majoring in English and was a senior at New York University (NYU). As part of my graduation requirements, I wrote a senior thesis called "Black Creation" named after *Black Creation* a literary journal created by Black students at NYU. I wanted to write about a Black playwright, a Black novelist, and a Black poet and I had chosen to write about Ed Bullins, the playwright-in-residence at the New Lafayette Theatre and a major writer in the Black Arts Movement (BAM). When I attempted to contact Ed Bullins and could not, I decided to take a trip uptown to Harlem where the New Lafayette Theatre was located. Although I had no appointment, my spirit guided me towards making this trip. In the long run, this trip was transformative and foreshadowed what I would do throughout my life as a literary activist.

Not surprisingly, Ed Bullins was not at the theater, but there was a tall young, brown-skinned man who had a caring and approachable aura and who informed me that he would let Ed Bullins know that I had come. He also said that I could talk to him about my project. That man was Richard Wesley, the renowned dramatist who had determined after he graduated from Howard University that he wanted to work with the playwright Ed Bullins.

As I prepared for my interview with Richard Wesley (nearly five decades after meeting him in 1972) I thought about my memories of him in the Black Arts Movement (BAM) and in Black Theater. His work as a Black playwright and screenwriter has been compelling and notable and as a dramatist he has continued to write and to work with students at NYU. His description of his life and work over the last six decades is vividly described in his memoir *It's Always Loud in the Balcony: A Life in Black Theater, from Harlem to Hollywood and Back*. The reflections from this memoir were the focus of my interview.

When we began the interview, I told Wesley that while reading *It's Always Loud in the Balcony* I felt like we were sitting in a living room and that he was the protagonist in the plays that he had written over the last five decades. Wesley agreed with me and said that when he started his memoir he decided to not only talk about the history of Black theater, film, and television, but to talk about it from the point of view of someone who was a participant. In his words, "If not an outright leader of this cultural history, certainly I was in the movement and active in it. And so, yes I am a protagonist."

I asked Wesley what it was like working with Ed Bullins and his response spoke volumes about his determination to work with this powerful playwright. He responded "I interviewed for a position at the New Lafayette Theatre because I wanted to work with Ed Bullins. I was told that I did not have enough experience; however, I decided that if I could not get a job there, I was going to study and find a way to work with Ed Bullins. Wesley continued:

Working with Ed was a continuation of everything that I was learning from Owen Dodson and Ted Shine at Howard University, but with a little more political ideology attached to the art. And it was really like being in graduate school. Ed was a very attentive teacher, a very patient teacher, and I just got a ton of information from him. He taught me about the nuances of writing dialogue for characters. It wasn't just enough to have an ear. You had to be willing to give your whole self over to these characters, to put yourself in their shoes and to see the world through their eyes. And you had to be willing to always open yourself up to new possibilities in terms of how you were going to create your characters, how you were going to develop your plot. And you could not keep yourself closed off, but as a writer, you had to be that antenna. And in order to be an antenna, you have to be vulnerable and you have to be out in the spaces.

Wesley's response was a message for all writers. Writers develop their craft through working with their mentors and through interacting with and being in community with other writers and creatives. While at Howard University as a drama major, Wesley had an opportunity to meet other playwrights who had an impact on him. These include George Norford, one of the founding members of the Negro Playwrights Company, Wesley's department chair Owen Dodson, and Ossie Davis, a former Howard alum would frequently come back and visit Howard drama students. Thus while in college, Wesley had had an opportunity to be in "spaces" where he could interact with Black playwrights and screenwriters and he continued to be "out in these spaces" through his work at the New Lafayette Theatre.

When asked about his views on the Black Arts Movement, Wesley conveyed that he had some ideological conflicts and that he did not want to be pigeon-holed. He found a way to resolve these conflicts by identifying himself as a dramatist. As a dramatist, he could "write whatever in whatever genre was necessary to tell the story in the most efficient way," be that as a playwright, screenwriter, or writer for television. He stated:

As it turned out I was not pigeon-holed, but that was not my aim as a writer. A dramatist was what I wanted to be, a playwright, a screenwriter, a writer for television, facile in all of those areas. That's what dramatists do. I wanted to have the freedom to move in whatever direction best suited me at the time.

Meeting and coming to know Richard Wesley deepened my awareness, consciousness, and knowledge of the impact and value of the writers, artists, and activists who were spearheading the Black Arts Movement.

#### About Writers on Writing

Writers on Writers is a radio show that I began creating and producing at Medgar Evers College in 2003. The show airs every Sunday over the airwaves of WNYE, 91.5 FM. As the host of the show, I have interviewed writers about their lives, their craft, and their work. During COVID, I expanded the format of the show and began to host podcasts and post the interviews of the writers on the Center for

Black Literature YouTube page. (122) Center for Black Literature Medgar Evers College - YouTube. These literary meditations on Richard Wesley represent a window into the world of my book project. I would love to hear from you. Please visit my website at [www.drbrendamgreene.com](http://www.drbrendamgreene.com).

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