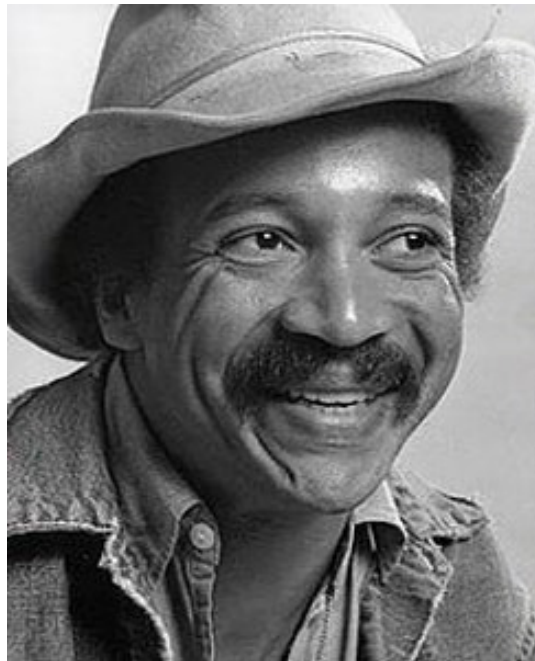


METROGRAPH

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BLACK PICTURE SHOW IN CONTEXT



Bill Gunn

On January 6, 1975, at the height of the Black Arts Movement, Bill Gunn's *Black Picture Show* opened at the Vivian Beaumont Theater as part of the New York Shakespeare Festival. The show stages a conversation between an aging, mentally ill Black screenwriter, playwright, and poet and his son, also an artist. While the father, Alexander, struggles to create work that's both politically and aesthetically meaningful and commercially successful, his son, J.D., strives to make radical art.

The intergenerational conflict between father and son drives the narrative of *Black Picture Show*. Its lyricism, absurdism, and filmic attributes, however, turn a family drama into an avant-garde theater piece. The form of Gunn's play also stages the challenge for Black artists to choose between producing experimental or mainstream work.

Although the Black Arts Movement expanded opportunities for Black artists, it championed political work based in cultural pride. While the saying "Black is beautiful" epitomized the period, it didn't reflect the opinions of American artists, producers, and theatergoers more generally. American theater remained predominantly white, leaving Gunn's experimental meta-race drama without an audience. A show ahead of its time, *Black Picture Show* has recently found a future as a part of the June 2021 staged reading at New York's Artists Space Gallery, directed by Awoye Timpo, in conjunction with an exhibition and program series dedicated to the work of Bill Gunn. The availability of this filmic adaptation has been extended through its dissemination on Metrograph.com.

Opening with a description reminiscent of James Baldwin's essay, "Notes of a Native Son" and at the funeral of Alexander, the son turned narrator, J.D., establishes that the play will recall the last day of his father's life. Before doing so, J.D. has a macabre encounter with Alexander's corpse, breaking off Alexander's stiffened ear to learn how to listen better. The lyrical flow from material to metaphorical characterizes the play. The opening soliloquy reads like a spoken-word poem and details that J.D. "sucked forth a poem of vengeance" from his father's dead lips as the family laid the patriarch to rest. The play itself does not take the form of a poem but flows with verse that aligns itself with the work of contemporaries Amiri Baraka and Ntozake Shange, both of whom put pressure on the distinction between poem and play.

Moving from the gravesite to a series of conversations in a space that shifts from Alexander's home to a mental-health facility, *Black Picture Show* questions the sacrifices a Black artist must make in order to survive in the industry and whether the sins of the father pass down to the child. J.D. fights choosing between being a Black revolutionary artist and a commercial success, a decision that has driven his father mad.

Conflicting, contradicting, drifting, shifting, and jumping back and forth in time, the thoughts and desires of the Black artists fill the space of the play, and throughout Timpo's production, the actors (André Holland and Jason Bowen) alternate the roles of Alexander and J.D. A play about intergenerational conflict shifts to one about internal turmoil; the 2021 production externalizes Black thought.



As a staged reading for film, the play trades in the ambiguity of it being both a conversation and, perhaps, a monologue from J.D.'s perspective. The lyricism of the dialogue heightens the realism. In addition, the lack of a stable setting for the action, moving seamlessly from home to mental-health facility, creates a surrealist drama. Are we living inside J.D.'s head, reliving the last day of Alexander's life, or both? From the Harlem Renaissance in Langston Hughes's "Negro and the Racial Mountain" to Jackie Sibblies Drury's *Fairview*, Black artists have questioned the type of work that garners white audience's purchase. The play ends with Alexander, strapped for money, agreeing to sell an artistically unrealized screenplay to a white producer named Phillippe.

At the level of form, *Black Picture Show* stages the very conflict that it describes and anticipates the turn to absurdism in contemporary Black theater (Drury's *Fairview*, Aleshea Harris's *What to Send Up When It Goes Down*, and Antoinette Chinonye Nwandu's *Pass Over*). Understanding how to appear Black for a white audience produces enough racial gymnastics to drive anyone mad. As Phillippe explains when visiting Alexander for dinner, he wants a comedy filled with stereotypical depictions of Black people, "a Black script... down Black humor" not "too arty." But also says, "Don't be afraid. Remember, in this case the Black is the rule." White executives hold the ruler for what measures as just Black enough, and artists must try to fit their vision into those dimensions.

As a stage production opening with a funeral might suggest, *Black Picture Show* is a memory play. The 2021 version offers the opportunity to reconsider Bill Gunn's drama as a part of a larger history. The before-its-time show also contemplates the concept of time and asks us to remember a period of Black radical art that refused categorization. As many artistic institutions contemplate life after Covid, the return to Gunn's work enables us to rethink not only what work we produce but how we produce it.