Till They Listen
Bill Gunn Directs America

Edited by Hilton Als & Jake Perlin

Preface

Hilton Als

This is a story she liked to tell me from time to time: When Bill Gunn, the esteemed filmmaker, playwright, novelist, and actor was perishing from AIDS in 1989, she baked him a cake. After she baked the cake, she drove over to the hospital where he was dying. She knew he couldn't eat that cake, she said, but she wanted him to have it.

The woman who told me that story and also baked the cake: Toni Morrison. She told me about Bill and that hospital visit twenty or so years after that moment occurred. When I first heard that story, we were sitting in Toni's home in Nyack, New York, a very interesting and unusual hamlet where artists of color like Bill and Toni could live relatively hassle free only forty minutes or so from the hassles of Manhattan. Toni's house was filled with light; from her sitting room, one could see the shimmering or dull—depending on the weather—Hudson River, and sometimes, as she talked, scenes from the past floated along the river or in one's mind, including her twenty-year-old memory of Bill and that cake. Sometimes, while eating something other than cake in her dining room, and looking out at the Hudson from her living room window, I thought back to that time when Toni's expression of home and care probably made a big difference to Bill, who could not go home, and who could not be spoiled and nourished.

Sometimes, I would ask Toni about Bill—this would have been 2009 or so—because I thought I might try to write something about him. I was drawn to his hunger for self-expression, his extensive mind. I considered him a poet in the way that I thought of Orson Welles, Pasolini, and Cocteau as poets—poets who wrote in prose, and made films, and designed worlds that drew on what they knew, and what they imagined. I admired how Bill and those artists ultimately never let other people put a limitation on creativity, let alone the world.

Born in Philadelphia in 1934, Bill came from a show business family; his mother had been on the stage. I might have first read about him in Patricia Bosworth's 1978 biography, *Montgomery Clift*. Clift remains one of my favorite American actors; I was especially struck, as Bosworth had it, by Clift's close relationship to two men of color—his companion, Lorenzo James, and Bill, who was a young actor working in 1950s summer stock when he was taken up by the older performer. Were they lovers? I don't know. Also: Who was this guy? A little research in our 1990, pre-Google world, revealed that, in addition to acting with James Dean and Ethel Waters, among others, Bill had, later in his career, directed masterpieces like *Ganja & Hess* and *Personal Problems*, both of which took decades to become widely available in their original forms.

But I knew Bill the playwright first. In 1989, I went to The Public Theater to see a play called *The Forbidden City*, starring the incomparable Gloria Foster. Before the curtain went up on that evening's performance, The Public's founder, Joe Papp, who had also directed the show, announced that the play's author, Bill Gunn, had died the day before, and he and the cast were dedicating the show to the writer.

It was a frightening time. Many men who worked in "the arts" specifically were dying of a disease that some people still called Gay Cancer, and something about New York was dying too; perhaps one could call it a certain critical excitement about the culture at large, all those discerning queens who had grown up in the 1940s, 1950s, and early 1960s in Iowa or some such place, immigrants from other worlds who lived in and for Manhattan and what she had to give, including the New York City Ballet, La MaMa, the Metropolitan Opera; those guys were dying and taking their love of culture and their stories of culture—which actor starred in this, why that ballerina wasn't as good as the one who retired two seasons past—with them, leaving dead holes filled with now disintegrating memories about who had filled various stages with love, once.

The Forbidden City is a kind of elegy—an elegy for the love Bill Gunn never knew growing up. The drama was, I think, the only play I'd seen up until then that featured a black woman, a mother, who wasn't maternal; indeed, Foster and Gunn's Molly, Philadelphia-based and a refugee from the American South, displayed a degree of hatred and discontent that was unique in the theatre; Molly was a gargoyle who spit blood and tried to pass it off as tears. Her son, Nick Jr., tries not to see his mother for who she is; he wants to love her and thus be loved. But to love you have to admit to your capacity for it. Molly can never do that; what she's more comfortable with is her awfulness, and her terrors. Citizens in the forbidden city were forbidden to love.

And there was something in the actor playing Nick Jr., and the way Bill had written him, that told me he was gay, and that what Molly was punishing him for, among other things, was his queerness. I put the play away in my head for many years. I didn't know how autobiographical the piece was until much later. I put it away because it was tragedy I could not wholly face as it raised certain questions: about how familial love worked, or didn't work, and messed with your own chances of love, and establishing a family of your own.

Throughout his career, Bill created or helped bring to the screen an incredible array of Black female characters, including Fanny Johnson (Diana Sands), a hairdresser who fries hair in her tenement apartment in the 1970 flick, *The Landlord*. Adapted by Bill from Kristin Hunter's 1966 novel, *The Landlord* was, I think, one of the first movies I ever saw about Black life that resembled the life I knew. Set in funky Park Slope that's resistant to gentrification but it's happening anyway, *The Landlord* was director Hal Ashby's first feature film, and, in addition to Sands, there are great turns by Pearl Bailey and Lee Grant. The film was not without racism on the set. In an interview conducted years after the movie came out, Lou Gossett Jr., who plays Fanny's fragile furious husband, said that Ashby remarked how he didn't want Gossett to kiss Sands on the mouth—their lips looked too big on camera.

When Fanny becomes involved with the white landlord and eventually gives birth to his child, she gives the baby up, saying that she wants his race to be put down as white because she wants him to "grow up casual, like his Daddy." The look on Sands' face is

filled with bitterness and regret: love won't conquer all, certainly not racism. Sometimes when I see Diana's face at the end of the movie, or recall the bullshit Ashby spewed, I want to move to another country altogether. I'm always struck by how anyone gets to create anything at all, especially in our America. Bill had to deal with that kind of crap at every turn. The wonderful writers assembled here touch on his efforts to get work produced, so, I won't belabor the point here, but just to say the film industry's current "woke" status doesn't really impress me much since they weren't woke for Bill. Still, he soldiered on because he was a soldier, a fighter of and for ideas that his body couldn't contain, and that he wanted to share and express for you, and to you.

Bill's ear for the authentic moment—the moment in which a character reveals himself or herself before connecting with another character, or not at all—had such a powerful effect on my understanding of what dramatic writing is; he transcribed what characters know and then showed it to them and the audience, all at the same time. Looking back, I can see now that when I was trying to write about Bill, I wanted him back, and making things. I don't want to leave any of the AIDS dead behind, since they've made so much that matters, down to the memory of master Toni Morrison baking a cake and visiting another wizard for a spell, if only because it makes everyone involved feel a little less lonely.

We Should Burn All The Books and Start All Over Again
Interview with Bill Gunn by Janus Adams
Published in *Encore*, June 1973

Bill Gunn is an actor, author, playwright, and filmmaker. His new film, *Ganja & Hess* (the second of a trilogy of which *Stop*, for Warner Brothers, was the first, and *The Partisan* is anticipated) will be released by Kelly–Jordan, Inc. this month. His film biography of Bessie Smith will be released in the coming year.

People have, for years, spoken of the many "comings" of Bill Gunn. His range seems limitless. Of the fruits of these "comings" he writes:

To the Black Male Children
You are the despised of the earth
That is as if you were water in the desert.
To be adored on this planet is to be a symbol of success.
And you must not succeed on any terms.
Because life is endless.

Janus Adams: What are the dimensions of success?

Bill Gunn: Fellini's *Roma*. The film and the man. That's an incredible document by a brilliant artist who has nothing left to say. The whole of society is like that. There is nothing left. And we must look at this.

In *Ganja & Hess*, you have Dr. Hess Green, and look at what he's doing. He's a successful, safe, Black man. That's why he's there on that estate, surrounded by that furniture and those old paintings, everything that is White. He doesn't know how much he's living in their ruins. And he's doing things against Black people. And through the whole thing, Luther the minister tries to get him to go to church. But Hess won't go. Not until the end when he has everything material and there's nothing left to get does he set out to find the truth.

Adams: Your poem, *To the Black Male Children*, is it for Hess?

Gunn: Yes. In the film it's delivered by Meda (acted by Gunn). Meda is the messenger. He's there to bring the truth to Hess, with this blood, and all the things blood suggests: generation, reality, life-source.

Adams: None of your characters in *Ganja & Hess* are what one might call, in a traditional sense "heroes." Yet many Black people today say that this is what we need.

Gunn: First of all, the whole idea of heroes comes from Whites. Anybody can do anything, can get out of any situation, if he wants to badly enough. Or he can choose not to get out of it. And that is reality. There are no people who are constantly illusive, no matter what

they're ducking. There just aren't. Yet, here we are running around like we're John Waynes or Alan Ladds or Gary Coopers, carrying on and fighting after the very same things. It's so stupid. We are what we are.

Saying that this is what we must have in film is another form of censorship. I mean, a man can fail, really fail miserably, but if he comes to understand why he failed, then he has succeeded. And if he's an artist, maybe he should write a book called "How I Failed." If it's well written and beautifully perceived, then it's valid. That's why I say in the poem that "You must not succeed on any terms." Because I'm talking about their kind of succeeding. And I think we've come to the point where we have to totally ignore them. The freedom of Black people now depends on Black people remaining totally free.

Adams: Describe this freedom.

Gunn: I don't know; I've never been free. I've had free moments, moments where I've been very free. But I think we're cursed because we're constantly thinking. So you're free one second and then comes a chained-up thought. I think the realistic way to begin work toward freedom is for Black people to burn their dictionaries and encyclopedias and history books and start all over. Maybe then our children will be free.

I used to hate the fact that I had no education. I was thrown out in my second year of high school and I never went back. But now I have less to unlearn. I used to think it was me, until I realized that it was them and their schools. So I think Black education should be started. All this integration stuff and bussing—into what? For what? One time I saw some Black kids in a crowd and it was like they were walking through a row of tombstones. I had the perfect image that they were going through a grave into a mausoleum. It didn't make sense.

Adams: Who would teach the new Black education?

Gunn: Poets. The Greeks did it.

Adams: An education in the humanities?

Gunn: Yes. Let's start talking about the basic, organic things of life.

Adams: And would we have dialogues?

Gunn: Sure. I think we'd do more listening to the children, and that would help us get back to the basics. Because, you see, this civilization is at its height, yet it doesn't work. So everything has to be rewritten. As Black people, our creative time is ahead of us.

Adams: What about the so-called Black films?

Gunn: This thing that is happening in Black film will last maybe a year. But it has already lasted for 25 years with White people. That's how fast we move. Black bad movies begin where White bad movies leave off. If a Black person goes to the films, he's either trying to understand his reality or trying to escape it. But that reality is much more sophisticated (that word is never used in terms of Black people, but it should be) than the White movie audience's reality. The White audiences nowadays are escaping boredom, whereas what we are escaping—if we choose to escape—is by no means boring. The audiences are different. Black people can't linger on a lie.

Adams: What about images for our young?

Gunn: You see the boys now straightening their hair and looking like Superfly. Suddenly that ridiculous reality becomes a fad. It will last, like any other fad, for six months or so. But they take it as a fad. Whereas White people have been pretending to be Doris Day for 25 years. And they will go on being Doris Day while we're all in concentration camps if it's up to them.

So it's not the same thing. We're beginning with an unreal character that is taken from such a reality that it's starting way up here.

Adams: What do you get from these contemporary Black films?

Gunn: Nothing. The only truth you're going to get is from artists. Not politicians, not technicians, not anybody but artists—people who think creatively. Creativity is something that can happen only in the mind. It doesn't matter whether you're dealing with clay or paints or words or just your way of living. Not many Black artists have been attracted to film, and those who are attracted can't get the money. But we are the most creative people in the world, which is an extraordinary thing. We can take pig intestines and make them into such an incredible dish that you forget where they came from and what you're eating.

And I hope that one day it will happen for us with film. That's the way I came into film. I had this poem I wanted to film. It may take 20 movies to make it, but that's all right.

But now we've got technicians and opportunists attracted to this thing, along with all the White vultures.

Adams: I hear there's going to be a sequel to *Superfly*. The original was done with Black funds with Warner coming in for the distribution rights. The sequel will be done by the studio itself, without Phillip Fenty, the Black writer.

Gunn: Well, Black people making films are chosen by Whites. And the overwhelming drive of the films these White people are producing is to get Whitey. It is all very flattering.

Adams: Don't you agree that our goal should be liberation instead of separation or integration, both of which still maintain Whites as the center of our sphere of reference?

Gunn: Yes. The White man is getting desperate now because he is not being included in all our thoughts and movements. He doesn't even care if you kill him as long as you are concerned about him. God knows, he wages wars all over the place for this glorious kind of involvement in everybody's life and religion. And, you know, if children were taught what freedom really is, they'd find that it does not include Whites. That's why I say everything has to be rewritten.

Adams: What about its artistic translation?

Gunn: It's an exciting time we have ahead of us. But I got very upset at Imamu Baraka once when he said, "Art must speak of the people's struggle."

Adams: Black censorship again?

Gunn: Yes. Because art can't be touched. It can't be tied down. This is why the artist is always the first one to go to prison—because the government can't grab hold of him. I think it's because artists are the only people who seem *compelled* to be free. That is their art.

Adams: What do you want to invest in your art?

Gunn: The truth of my experience. Because that's all I have to give. And if I could make my own film now, I think it would be about everything I went through for two weeks of my life that year when I was alone. If I could get myself to be absolutely honest about everything I went through, that would be terrific.

Adams: Why the exile?

Gunn: It came at a time when I was heavily into this activism thing. I couldn't do anything; I had to withdraw. And I never left the house.

Adams: Did you do it to protect your artistic perspective?

Gunn: Yes, because I don't think art is political. But I think art can end up political. You can create a political statement or political idea, but I wouldn't set out to do that. So for that year I had to withdraw, pull back, and take stock so that I could work.

Adams: In trying to achieve complete honesty, what is the most private thing you've dealt with publicly?

Gunn: Love. The very small back-of-the-brain thoughts. The things that have come close to destroying me or another person or a relationship. I don't mean love in a romantic sense; at times it is almost carnivorous, full of desperation and need. I have dealt with the myths of heterosexuality and homosexuality and my attitudes towards them. I have gotten down to the word itself and then dismissed it. I have found out what's behind the word. Am I behind it? I have dealt with these things, in symbols mostly.

Adams: Is *Ganja & Hess* autobiographical?

Gunn: There's a lot of me in it. It's about the many addictions I've had in my life. I wrote symbolically about blood because everyone writes about money. Besides, I was trying to get to the truth of the matter, and that's what blood is. I wasn't about to call the film *Truth* because that's a little pompous.

Adams: You mentioned dealing with parental love. In your work, how have you treated your relationship with your parents?

Gunn: Camille Yarbrough wrote a poem which says, "It always comes out mad." That's a beautiful line, and it says a lot about Black parents. I knew they were there and I knew I was their child in the middle of the reality of being in that house. I grew up in West Philadelphia, and my father worked very hard all day, came home, ate a huge dinner, and went to bed. So we never spent much time together. But sometimes he would play the piano and sing and tell me stories about vaudeville (he knew Bessie Smith very well), or he would talk about his childhood.

But so much time would be spent on the fact that he was exhausted. And I was to feed on the knowledge that all this was being done in order to give me the material things that would make me different from all the other children. That was supposed to be enough. Because they were sacrificing their lives so I wouldn't have to go through what they went through. But I didn't know that because I had never been through what they'd been through.

My mother was a very social woman. She worked very hard in organizations. She once said she took 50 Black kids to the beach, and I think that's terrific. But I don't understand any of it. She never took me.

Adams: Is your play *Johannas* about your own parents?

Gunn: Yes I won an Emmy for it when it was done on television. It dealt with my parents' experiences as they were told to me and the results of these experiences I observed and lived through. I wrote that play for them out of their reality.

Adams: I wonder how you'd deal with it out of your reality.

Gunn: I couldn't deal with it on my own level because it would get too complex.

When I lived at home, I would leave and go to my room or wherever, and things would get very complicated. I had nothing to do with their reasons for raising me.

At times I thought I was insane—really crazy—because I didn't fit in with everything as I was supposed to. If you're treated in a certain way, you're supposed to react in a certain way and become a certain something. I wasn't reacting correctly, and I wasn't becoming any of the right things.

Even when I was an actor I wasn't right. I never fit in. It used to terrify me. But now I look and say, "Well, it's made me what I am today." I was Black with red nappy hair—too light for this and too dark for that. I never had any problems with my own people, but Whites take you on all these trips with all these categories. It was like they were playing dominoes with me.

As an actor, it really affected me. I'm really very pessimistic, especially when something goes right. Every time something turns out right, I see it as the triumph of the "negatives."

Adams: How did they type you as an actor?

Gunn: Very nice; a pleasant college type. I remember when I was up for a part once, and the director, who I had worked with before, said I was a very good actor, but I was too clean cut. So I said, "Well, let me read." He said, "No, this is a delinquent, a guy who's been on the street; you're not right for the part." But I convinced him to let me read. So I went home, put on some old clothes, went out, had dinner, and came home and went to bed in those clothes. The next day, I went to the reading—I didn't comb my hair, wash up, or anything. He just took one look at me and said, "All right, the part is yours."

His idea of a bad nigger had to do with the barber shop and the tailor. You always have to coincide with their fantasies. I got so tired of that.

Adams: Is that why you started writing?

Gunn: Yes. I finally found freedom in writing. I could do it at my kitchen table and there would be nobody to tell me what to do or what to think. Now I've stopped writing for the theater because it always has to be blown apart and started all over again. It's performed on the proscenium or in the round—with that rhetoric and heightened reality—and repeated year after year. At least in film you can put the focus where you want it to be. In *Ganja & Hess* there are many different interpretations. I don't like to spell things out for people.

Adams: Is there more imagination, more the element of the puzzle in film?

Gunn: Yes. You give people a space in which to move or think. You give them as much freedom, within your concept, as you can. You can get a conception of something and you allow them to find themselves within that conception.

In fact, that's why pictures like *Sounder* upset me. They spell things out too much. They took a children's book and made it into a film for Black audiences. So that shows you what they think of us.

Adams: To what audiences do you project your work?

Gunn: I really don't know who my audience is yet or if I even have one. It may be strange to a lot of people, but I work. They'll talk about what I did, and I don't care if they boo it or scream at it. I'd like them to see so much, get so mad, that it makes them laugh in that sad way.

And yet I'm not sure film is the end for me either. I might end up writing books again because I don't like to be dependent on so many people to get to the final product.

Thoughts are most important to me now. And by the time it goes through my head, then the camera, the actors, the producers, the investors, it comes out something else. Only if I struggle very hard does it come out in some way resembling the original idea.

Adams: Are you more interested in projecting many thoughts or a specific thought?

Gunn: Three words that have come to mean everything to me are identity, memory, and eternity. These are incredible things to deal with.

Adams: How do you deal with them?

Gunn: Identity first. I haven't even begun to deal with eternity. But identity is almost finished. I've spent as much time as I think I need to spend on it. I know who I am;

I'm not sure I know who I've been or who I'm going to be, because I change constantly like everything else does.

Memory is most important to me because that's my work. That's what an artist is: he remembers and records. But you don't get it mixed up with your life or your identity.

And eternity is the only thing that makes me feel really very good because I know it's something that White people have no control over. I can never have any control over it either. I think it's something that will sweep us all up in the same or different directions.

I really distrust anything that any man on earth has control over. If a lion is attacking you, you can throw him a pile of meat. He will stop and eat the meat and go to sleep. But if a man is attacking you, he'll attack you for the sheer thrill of it. And you can throw anything at him (besides a knife or a bullet) and it will have no effect whatsoever.

Adams: Identity, memory—especially eternity. I'm thinking of the poem again. What would you give to the Black male children?

Gunn: I don't know why I feel Black women are going to be all right. Maybe it has something to do with women's involvement in the physical act of creating another human being.

But in my opinion, when they think of annihilating or they think of birth control, they think of the Black male child. The White male is the perpetrator. And his enemy is the Black.

Adams: The White male is the perpetrator. And his enemy is the Black, Asian, Brown, or Indian male. He's directed everything toward us.

Gunn: What's the result of this? Jimmy Baldwin said it in that conversation with Nikki Giovanni on *Soul*: it's being crazy. Coming home crazy from the pressure. The world is in terrible trouble now. And I think the Black male has a lot to understand. He not only has to understand his maleness in terms of himself; he's got to understand and see his women in a different light. And he's got to do it all at once. Completely. He's got to give more time to his women than to his hatred of the White male. He's got to give all of his time to his own people now.

Adams: For eventual freedom?

Gunn: Our real freedom.

Bill Gunn on *Ganja & Hess*
Unpublished, n.d.
Reprinted faithfully

IN "GANJA & HESS" MY ANTI-HERO, HESS GREEN, EXISTS AMONG THE DISSOLVING RUINS OF AN EXTRAVAGANT WHITE SOCIETY THAT HE NEVER IMAGINED. HE HAS COME TO HUNGER FOR THE BLOOD AND TRUTH OF ANY AND ALL EXPERIENCE THAT RELATES TO HIS EXISTENCE. HE IS LETHARGIC, NUMBED BY THE WEIGHT OF HIS EUROPEAN POSSESSIONS, THE ANCIENT EX-POSSESSIONS OF DEAD WHITE PEOPLE. THEN NEXT HE IS BORED.....THEN MOTIVATED. HIS MOTIVATION IS TO LET GO. WHEN HE HAS LET GO, THEN THERE IS A DEEP-GUT DESIRE WITHIN HIM TO EXIST, CREATE, AND SURVIVE ON HIS OWN. THAT'S WHY THE TRUE BLACK STORY IS NOT CONCERNED WITH THE ANCIENT WHITE PROBLEM OF RACISM, WHICH WE SEE AS AN AGING WHITE INDULGENCE....WHICH WE CAN NO LONGER SUPPORT AS ARTISTS OR AS A PEOPLE.

THE WHITE CONTROLLED CINEMA IS THE GRAND-PUBLIC-HIGH-ADMISSION COLISEUM ENTERTAINMENT IN WHICH BLACK FLESH IS PEDDLED EVERY MINUTE OF EVERY HOUR OF EVERY DAY OF EVERY YEAR TO BRING IN THE DOLLAR. NOTHING MORE. IT'S THAT COLD.

FROM MY POEM IN "GANJA & HESS": TO BE ADORED ON THIS PLANET IS TO BE A SYMBOL OF SUCCESS (IT IS PERSONALLY DANGEROUS TO PLEASE THE ENEMY) AND YOU MUST NOT SUCCEED ON ANY TERMS (THAT WE MUST REMAIN SEPARATE FROM THE LIE AT ALL COSTS) BECAUSE (YOUR) LIFE EXPERIENCE IS THE TRUTH ONLY AS YOU LIVE IT AND AS YOU TELL IT.

IT IS STILL DIFFICULT BECAUSE IT IS NOT WITHIN THE WHITE AUDIENCE'S EXPERIENCE TO CONCEIVE OF SUCH A THING AS YOUR LIFE. BUT THESE ARE TIMES WHEN THE WHITE AUDIENCE AND CRITIC MUST SIT DOWN AND LISTEN QUIETLY OR BE GONE. IF HE CANNOT LISTEN AND LEARN, THEN HE MUST NOT CONCERN HIMSELF WITH BLACK CREATIVITY.

A CHILDREN'S STORY I WROTE SPEAKS OF A BLACK CHILD THAT DREAMED OF A STRONG WHITE GOLDEN-HAIRED PRINCE OR PRINCESS WHO WOULD COME AND SAVE HIM FROM BEING BLACK. HE CAME, SHE CAME....AND AS TIME PASSED AND REVELATIONS MOVED FORWARD, IT WAS DISCOVERED THAT INDEED THE BLACK CHILD WAS THE PRINCE AND HE HAD SAVED HIS DREAM FROM BEING WHITENED.

The Cinematic Transgressions of Bill Gunn

Ruun Nuur

The very act of transgression is a biological trait for any true independent Black filmmaker.

While some have considered the exploration of the political-cultural-aesthetic multiplicity of Blackness through a white-originated technology to be facetious, given its ethnographic arrival in certain sections of the world, but specifically Africa, there lies a unique cohort of cinematic practitioners who've outright refused to build on the traditionalist blueprint and opted to make shadows dance within the margins of the moving image. From Micheaux to Sembène, Akomfrah, Burnett, Collins, Dash and their global progeny, unified in the experience of being banned, censored, and/or sidelined for their filmic offerings, perhaps there's no better encapsulation of this subversion than that of Bill Gunn.

Despite being admired within cinephilic circles, the love wasn't reciprocated within the Hollywood system whose mandates restricted his inherent genius. With a career that boasts credits as thespian, playwright, and painter, to name a few, it is Gunn's filmography that truly operates as the singular memorial of his multi-hyphenated prowess. From his debut, *Stop* (1970), notoriously shelved by Warner Brothers, to the vampiric provocation of *Ganja & Hess* (1973) and his experimental finale *Personal Problems* (1980), lost for decades, his excruciatingly short cinematic catalogue stands in direct opposition to the confinements of genre, misogynoir, and the Hollywood super-structure.

As the second Black filmmaker to be invited into the studio system following Gordon Parks' semi-autobiographical *The Learning Tree* (1969), the Philadelphia born and bred filmmaker made his directorial debut just a year later. *Stop* explores a dysfunctional married white couple on vacation in Puerto Rico, where their growing tension is met with the new friendship of an attractive bisexual and biracial couple, and stars Gunn's unofficial muse, Marlene Clark, the only Black actor in one of four major roles. With an unambiguous representation of homosexual and interracial sexual encounters, *Stop* was slapped with the infamous MPAA X rating and never released theatrically. The following year, Stanley Kubrick's Academy Award nominated, X-rated, *A Clockwork Orange* was widely released by Warner Brothers, despite its controversial depiction of sexualized violence. Gunn's bold provocation was to be the first of many projects sidelined in various ways throughout his career.

Yet, despite the unexpected hurdle, in *Stop*, Gunn was just beginning his examination into the realm of the visual aphrodisiac, specifically around leading Black female characters. Gunn's vision was a radical departure from Black womanhood's celluloid legacy with common subservient depictions as either asexual maids for white women or white men's objects of desire. In Gunn's films, he's supremely interested in exploring sexuality as a means of self-actualization and notably in *Ganja & Hess*, as a means of survival.

In the vampiric arthouse cult classic, Marlene Clark once again devilishly charms as the module of Gunn's subtle fascination with the liberatory representations of exploitative erotic economies. In the era of Blaxploitation cinema, film financiers Kelly-Jordan

approached Gunn to make a modest $350,000 Black vampire film, but as Gunn took full creative control, the artist weaponized vampirism as a metaphor for addiction. Defying linear structure, *Ganja & Hess* tracks the descent of marital relations through an intoxicating audiovisual experience of two lost souls turned vampires, emphasizing the intimacy of the interpersonal into the bold resolution of Ganja's final act of survival as a means of empanciation. In both *Stop* and *Ganja & Hess*, Gunn reworked popular formulas of melodrama and horror, but with Black actors. Though the producers hoped the films would be palatable and marketable to mainstream audiences, on seeing the results, *Ganja & Hess* was recut for release without the Gunn seal of approval, and *Stop* was denied release altogether. Regardless, the final films, in Gunn's intended vision, rejected the white financiers' decrees to shrink his revolutionary vision.

Eventually outright rejecting the mainstream as a viable platform, Gunn partnered with Ishmael Reed and Steve Cannon on what would transform into his last feature, *Personal Problems*, a meta-soap opera about a working class Black family in New York. Originally intended to air on public television in 1980, the videocassette-shot film with no catchy story beats or shiny dialogue, relies heavily on actors' improvisation and offers a substitute to traditional narrative structure. In an extended cold opening that places viewers as voyeurs on a lunch date with a Harlem-based nurse, Johnnie Mae Brown, and a couple of girlfriends, Gunn expertly profiles the quotidian of Black womanhood as the nucleus of viewers' attention. Yet another subversive play on character dynamics and filmic form, *Personal Problems* builds on his portfolio of alternative cinematic delights.

Retooling genres of romantic drama, horror, and soap opera to blend his signature intoxicating union between sound and image, Gunn refuses to be rendered obscure. In the rarely seen directorial statement for *Ganja & Hess* located in Gunn's archives at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, the filmmaker declared, "The white controlled cinema is a grand-public-high-admission coliseum entertainment in which black-flesh is peddled every minute of every hour of every day of every year to bring in the dollar. Nothing more, it's that cold."

With his untimely death at 59, just one day before the premiere of his stage play, *The Forbidden City*, revered cultural critic Greg Tate succinctly eulogized the late Renaissance man for a piece in the *Village Voice*, "the attempt to bury Bill Gunn began in his life." Routinely erased from discourses on independent filmmaking of the 1970s that eternalize renegade white auteurs, it was Gunn who was actively creating an oasis within a lacuna of Black cinematic art marking his dual aptitude in text and image. With each film in delicate dialogue with one another, subverting the template of gendered and genre tropes and major motion picture regulations, Gunn has abided by his inherent transgressive genetic code to provide a crackling of warmth into the "cold" coliseum.

Bill Gunn by Ishmael Reed

Published in *Whitney Museum of American Art New American Film and Video Series #52*, 1990

What are the dry facts? In a bio sheet sent to me in 1979, Bill Gunn referred to himself as a writer/director. His play *Marcus in the High Grass* was produced in 1958 at the Theatre Guild in Westport. His second, *Johannas*, was produced in New York and Helsinki. *Black Picture Show* was produced at Lincoln Center in 1975 and, according to the sheet, a play called *Rhinestone* was to be produced for Broadway in 1978 and 1979. His novels were *All the Rest Have Died*, published by Delacorte Press in 1964, and *Rhinestone Sharecropping*, which Steve Cannon and I published, along with his play *Black Picture Show*. In addition to a dramatic version of *Rhinestone Sharecropping*, his play *The Forbidden City* opened the day following his death. The master of irony would have found this to be the ultimate irony.

He wrote the screenplays for *Stop*, *The Landlord*, *Angel Levine*, *Friends*, *Fame Game*, *Don't the Moon Look Lonesome*, and *The Greatest: The Muhammad Ali Story*. His teleplays included *Johannas*, *Sojourner Truth*, and *Change at 125th Street*.

It's an impressive career. But his credits and his numerous awards, which include an Emmy, and the honor accorded to *Ganja & Hess*, one of the most beautiful and unusual films ever produced in the United States, and to *Personal Problems*, an experimental soap opera, don't tell the story. The heroic story of an exquisite writer maintaining a quiet and elegant stoicism while being battered by the crass forces of bottom-line commercialism and racism. These forces and institutions are the subjects of biting comments in his *Black Picture Show* and *Rhinestone Sharecropping*, where Bill Gunn exposes, with the wit of a Bosch or the Rembrandt of Dutchmasters, the pernicious influences which poison and pollute our national imagination. The Hollywood that gave us Montgomery Clift and James Dean, his tortured and brooding friends—the Hollywood that gave us great technicians like James Wong Howe and Hugh Robertson—also gave us *Birth of a Nation*, *The Color Purple*, and the sinister characters, the producers and image makers who talk shop in *Rhinestone*. Unlike some of the young black filmmakers of today, who talk the same way, Bill was too risky, too moody, too much of a genius, too savvy, and too clever for the Hollywood moguls. They didn't find him bankable: "you write something people can understand. None-a-that intellectual junk that ain't worth a quarter, much less a million dollars," Sam Dodd, *Rhinestone*'s protagonist, is warned by one of the seamy Hollywood merchants he encounters in the film capital, where his adventures are similar to those of a Kafkaesque hero.

Gunn used the stage and the page to rail against these Movie Industry forces, not in the manner of the diatribe, but in the style of the samba and the bossa nova. With subtlety and with wit. He was too deft for the obvious. Too complicated. Too odd. "...if you expect to hold another assignment in this business you better learn to control your temper," Sam Dodd is advised by the same character. Gunn revealed the depraved managers of the Dream Factory, and its front-office tokens.

Pulitzer Prize winner Charles Gordone remembers Bill Gunn as being among those few black actors to read for parts in New York of the 1950s. At the time, James Dean was appearing in André Gide's *The Immoralist*, and another friend, Sal Mineo, was on Broadway as Yul Brynner's son in *The King and I*. Gunn was one of the first black actors to experiment with The Method and, as Charles Gordone recalls, he was a good actor and a sensitive one. He was slated to be the next major black male star but there was always trouble. He got the reputation for being difficult, the adjective they use for the uppity black man. He could kill with eloquence. He has J.D. say in *Black Picture Show* that "the poem is a sword." Bill Gunn's pen was his. He couldn't be bought. Throughout his work, Gunn used the image of castration when discussing the black male's position in American society. In *Rhinestone Sharecropping*, an athlete gets his nuts crushed. Each day the black man is subjected to symbolic castration. They get signified on and called out by their enemies in the media and elsewhere. If black male writers want to win establishment approval they'd better write fictional and dramatic versions of tabloid editorials about the "underclass," a code name for what is considered black male aberrant behavior, in stay-in-your-place forms. No experimentation. No cryptic images like the white man in the mask who recurs in *Ganja & Hess*. The focus on the Louis Armstrong doll in the production of the *Personal Problems*' version shot by Bill Stephens of People's Communications. The clown who appears when Charles Brown and his mistress are about to make love. No mixing of Bach's "Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring" with Bessie Smith. No poetic dialogues and monologues which on the surface seem incoherent. The black actor or director who gets ahead in Hollywood, using Gunn's imagery, is not in possession of his genitals. The seat of power.

You can tell what they want from blacks by the images they reward and put their dollars behind. In 1940, Hollywood gave Hattie McDaniel an Oscar for her role as a Mammy in *Gone with the Wind*. In 1990, Morgan Freeman was nominated for his role as a chauffeur in *Driving Miss Daisy*. Maybe ten years from now another member of America's permanent household staff will pick up a little man, the Oscar who comes alive and taunts a black actor in Amiri Baraka's brilliant *The Sidney Poet Heroical*. Symbolic castration. *The Color Purple* sends out one message. *Driving Miss Daisy*, another. Bill Gunn refused to submit his virile talent to the chopping block. Refused to stay in his place, and after being blackballed from the industry went out and badmouthed his persecutors. He, Cecil Brown, and Amiri Baraka are the black male poets of the Hollywood Plantation where there is white money and black money. "I will receive thirty thousand dollars and a small percentage. I am not flattered because the budget is eight million and the running rate for white writers of my caliber, or less, is at least two hundred and fifty thousand or more," Sam Dodd says in *Rhinestone Sharecropping*. After Bill Gunn was fired from working on a film, a white writer was brought in. Though the finished product differed only slightly from Gunn's version, the white writer got the credit.

In Hollywood he was a prince among the philistines. In *Rhinestone Sharecropping*, which like *Black Picture Show* and possibly *Ganja & Hess* are semi-autobiographical works, he voices his dissatisfaction about his treatment over two films. *The Greatest*. And *Stop*, which he felt was butchered by the producers. In Hollywood Bill Gunn was vamped. "I notified my union that I wished to put the matter into arbitration. They sent me a copy of the new script by the new writer. Out of a hundred and twenty, there were thirty-five pages that weren't mine. The rest were exactly as I wrote them. I made a legal objection to my union, to not being in the credits, trying to keep my one percent," says the character in *Rhinestone Sharecropping*. No wonder the central image in his classic *Ganja & Hess* was vampirism. Gunn was a sharecropper whose talent was vamped.

He was the solitary genius who caught hell from both whites and blacks in the industry. I remember taking *Personal Problems* to PBS in Washington, for possible showing on the network and being accosted by the sarcastic remarks of a black woman, the program director, as we viewed the tape. She referred to Gunn and the late Kathleen Collins Prettyman as members of what she characterized as the Hudson River school of cinematography, because of their cinematic style—a style that took its time to linger over a flower, a body of water, some interesting light, a walk through the woods, a camera that moseyed over elegant dinner scenes, or paused on a piece of sculpture. His beloved Hudson River Valley was his location for peace. Where Johnnie Mae of *Personal Problems* rendezvouses with her lover, Raymon, stealing some moments from the urban nightmare in which she and her husband, Charles Brown, live. But the Hudson River Valley is the haunted grounds of ancient Dutch legend. Of headless horsemen, and ghostly little men. It is the scene of one of what might be the country's most intellectual and sophisticated horror films, *Ganja & Hess*.

Personal Problems, this avant-garde soap opera, was never shown on PBS, which devoted hours of time to black crack stories and produced a maimed version of Richard Wright's *Native Son* and a docudrama which made vigilante gunman Bernard Goetz a hero. Gunn admired the European filmmakers, and a critic described *Personal Problems* as a soap opera as Godard would have done it. But he was not the Europhile that his critics said he was. Bill Gunn was eclectic and multicultural. His black aristocrats in *Ganja & Hess* and *Black Picture Show* were those ignored in the popular depiction of blacks by commercial whites, and blacks. Mythical welfare queens and blacks who always seem to be poised for a jump shot. Blacks whose dialogue is limited to Hey, Home. Nobody could do Gunn's blacks. Blacks who know about old furniture, azaleas, and who can order their wine in French. Blacks who seem to be saying that even after you have the assets and the class that will nag at you. At the end of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s dream is the cheerful hotel registration clerk, and the counter seat at Burger King. His people wanted dignity. Gunn's characters already have status, drive Rolls Royces and sportcars, and though

they might be a few months behind in their Mastercard payments, they will never have to return to the real sharecropping. Picking cotton, or working in a factory. When they clean up after whites, it's only metaphorically. At the end of Bill Gunn's vision is ennui. Hell is Eternal Boredom. Alienation. Notice how the alienated vampire anthropologist has to go into the ghetto to get fresh blood. Has to receive blood from bloods. Has to be recharged. The successful Doctor who can only receive eternal peace through communion with a community. *Personal Problems* brought Gunn to the community. If Oprah Winfrey now says that she wants to do a television series depicting blacks as ordinary people, and not as popular mass-media stereotypes of the kind that she presented in last year's pilot for *The Women of Brewster Place*, then *Personal Problems* beat Ms. Winfrey and the millions of dollars behind her by a decade.

After completing this production, which was shot between 1979 and 1982 Gunn said, now I know that I can do my own movies. *Personal Problems* was before its time. There was no commercial backing for this eccentric version of the soap opera which permitted black producers, a black director, black actors, and black writers and actresses to have control over their work. A black composer, Carman Moore, had the freedom to write whatever music he desired without fear of censorship. And though it was a black production, there were whites who appeared as actors and actresses and as members of the crew.

Bill Gunn achieved complete freedom to direct *Personal Problems* and though it was never adopted for showing by any network, Volume I premiered at the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris, November 1980, and in 1986 the completed work was honored by the Japan Foundation, which enabled the tape to be shown in six southern cities.

It was at video centers throughout the nation and was enthusiastically received by critics and the public when it was picked up by two local PBS affiliates, KQED television in San Francisco and WNYC in New York City, through the efforts of Robert Gore and Jane Muramoto. This soap opera about a nurse's aide, Johnnie Mae Brown, played by Vertamae Grosvenor, and her husband, Charles Brown, a New York City transit worker, played by Walter Cotton, provided a new direction for black artists on television and had widespread appeal. Even white audiences in Kentucky, Georgia, and Louisiana were able to identify with the problems of the people in the film. I know those people, an elderly white woman said to me.

Bill Gunn was dedicated to *Personal Problems* and like most of the participants worked within a budget that was based upon grants from the National Endowment for the Arts and the New York State Council for the Arts. Walter Cotton, who produced *Personal Problems* for Steve and me, remembers working with Gunn. "He was a morale builder and would reassure the crew and the actors with his humor when they encountered the usual problems associated with a small-budget production. He was easygoing and enthusiastic about his work. He inspired loyalty."

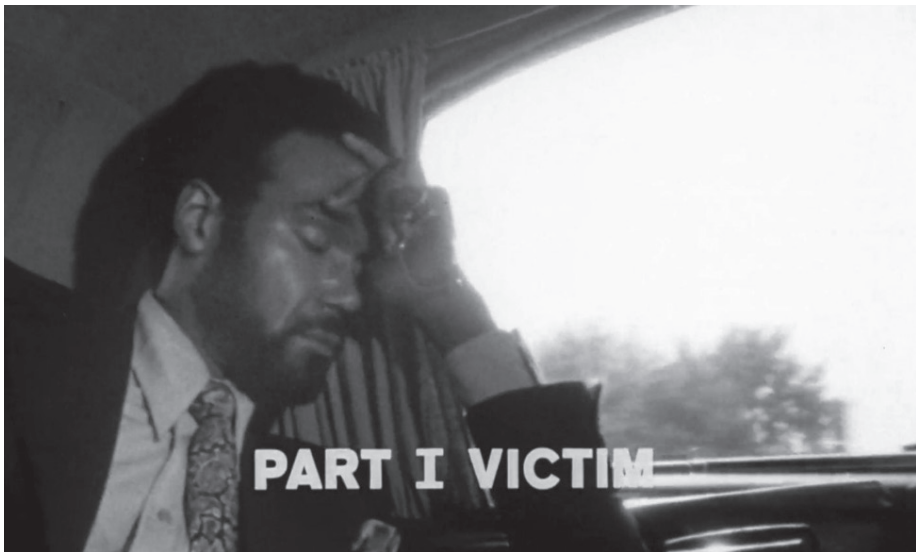
Though he was our friend and colleague he was not among us. He was remote, and alone as is the character in his Gothic film, and his favorite photo seemed to be that of Bill Gunn in boots and black cloak, like a German baron in a medieval castle. He hated telephones. I never really got to know him because I was always in a hurry. But I remember the cool and gentle voice on the telephone when I did reach him. He wanted to do another film with us, but we couldn't raise the money and were denied funds by a number of grant panels composed of our "peers." Until his death he was controversial, and was even labeled a misogynist by a newspaper that receives part of its revenue from skin ads, the king of hypocrites that Gunn would have viewed with his usual poker face. He never forgot that he was a black man in a society that's uncomfortable with black men, whether they appear in a Mapplethorpe exhibition or run for President. He was a gifted black man who was called paranoid, which means that one has a heightened sense of awareness, and evidence of that heightened sense is in all of his plays, films, and novels. Somebody said that the sweetest sounds come from hell and that's where his characters come from and that's where black men get their experience and pay their dues. Ganja says, everbody is some kind of freak. Everybody I know is into something, and before he dies the vampire's male assistant utters a speech that could have been Bill's. "The only perversion that can be comfortably condemned is the perversion of others. I will persist and survive. Without your society's sanctions. I will not be tortured. I will not be punished. I will not be guilty."

If John O. Killens was the soldier of darkness, James Baldwin the prophet of darkness, then Bill Gunn was the prince of darkness. And now that we are undergoing an assessment of his career with the kind of attention that eluded him during his life, we are beginning to see what producer Walter Cotton saw when working with Gunn. "He was an original. He was one-of-a-kind."

Playing in the Dark: Notes on *Ganja & Hess*

Michael Boyce Gillespie

Doctor Hess Green...
Doctor of anthropology
Doctor of geology...
While studying the ancient
Black civilization of Myrthia...
was stabbed by a stranger
three times...
one for God the Father
one for the Son...
and one for the Holy Ghost...
stabbed with a dagger,
diseased from that ancient culture...
whereupon he became addicted
and could not die...
nor could he be killed.



With a parable at the start, Bill Gunn's *Ganja & Hess* (1973) opens with the devising of a conceit, an allusive sketch at once Biblical and Africanist, before cutting to shots of European statuary accompanied by Sam Waymon's gospel dirge ("The Blood of the Thing"). This sequence is emblematic of the non-classical/experimental exquisiteness of the film throughout. The formal layering of Salvatore Albano's *The Fallen Angels* (1893) with the sonic deliverance of Waymon's song then cuts to a church with Black parishioners and

Reverend Luther Williams (Waymon) delivering a sermon. In the churning mix of score and sanctification, Williams's voiceover introduces his relationship to Dr. Hess Green (Duane Jones) with a note about his supplementary work as his chauffeur, "I work for Dr. Hess Green. He's an addict. He's a victim. He's addicted to blood." An archaeologist, Hess's vampiric affliction occurs as a result of being stabbed three times with a bone-like Myrthian dagger by his new and unstable assistant, George Meda (Bill Gunn), who later kills himself. As Harrison M. J. Sherrod observes, "It is fitting that Hess is a professor of archaeology, a discipline concerned with resurrecting the past, and the necromantic dimension of excavation takes a literal turn when he is possessed by the history of his *objet trouvé*."[1]

The film is crucially stirred by tremors of addiction and monstrosity. As Allen Weiss contends, "Monsters exist in margins. They are thus avatars of chance, impurity, heterodoxy; abomination, mutation, metamorphosis; prodigy, mystery, marvel. Monsters are indicators of epistemic shifts."[2] The deliberation of *Ganja & Hess* along this accumulative scale offered by Weiss centers on its rendering of culture, film form, and genre as discourse. In addition, there is Gunn's own brilliant disinterest in fulfilling the generic expectations of the film:

> [*Ganja & Hess* is] about addictions...That one can become addicted not only to drugs but everything we do in life more than once is in danger of addicting us, in a sense. I used blood because I was told to make a movie about a vampire...I just took a metaphor and. . . in the place of blood it could be anything. It could be drugs. It could be coffee. Anything that distracts you from yourself and that begins to take from one's self. And the fight to free oneself from that thing is the victory in the end...But I do like to make people think in movies. I do like throwing cross-images.[3]

Gunn's detached vampirism refashions the epistemological logic of monstrosity with a conception of art cinema as an enactment of film blackness.[4] The film is rife with striking renderings of the erotic coupled with a constant confluence of Christian and Africanist motifs. As Greg Tate suggested about the film, a part of its continued significance has much to do with its distinction as "Anti-European, anticapitalist, anti-Christian, homoerotic, Afrocentric, [and] cosmopolitan."[5]

Organizationally speaking, the film's narrative slides across multiple temporal shifts of the past, present, and future. As well, the focalization of the narrative across different characters contributes to the rich complexity of the film.[6] During the title sequence another song sung by Waymon, "The Blood of the Thing (Part 2)" offers a poetic summation of the film's vampiric operation and the arc of the narrative to come.

By the Christians it is written that in the Black Myrthian age / There existed an addiction to blood among its people. / Thousands of slaves were bled to death / But murdered in such a way that the slaves could not die. / There was visited upon them a curse that they should live forever / Unless the shadow of the cross, an implement of torture, touched their darkened hearts. /But since Christ had not come and the cross did not exist, / Don't you know (3x) they were cursed to walk the earth 'til the Christians came.

> "Filmmaking is an art; it is the new painting. Paintings have to move now, they just can't hang on the wall and look at you...They have to move now. It has to come out at us and say something. Filmmakers are the Rembrandts and the Van Goghs of this generation. Paintings are now either coming out of the canvas or moving around the wall. They're desperately trying to become films."
>
> —Bill Gunn[7]

Bill Gunn disobediently suspends the finite categorical claims of black film with *Ganja & Hess*. The film acts as a restipulation of the uncanny as a quotidian terror surrounding decay, ruin, historiography, and race. It enacts a disaggregation and ambivalence towards the classical codes of the vampire yet is still deeply invested in its core value of the consequential meanings of the living dead and everlasting emptiness. As Slavoj Žižek argued, "The return of the living dead...materializes a certain symbolic debt persisting beyond physical expiration."[8] The film's terms of this debt are evidenced by its pivoting departure from bloodlust spectacle to melancholy and addiction. The second section of the film details Hess's struggles and growing desolation. With all apologies to Blade, Hess offers a deeper sense of the trials and tribulations of a daywalker. When struck

with the hunger of blood, the soundtrack takes on a synesthetic rendering of Hess's interiority as the hailing buzz of Myrthia. This hunger as aural register becomes a sonic phasing of notes and electronics that showcases a looped layering of a Bongili work song from the Smithsonian's *Music of Equatorial Africa* album (1950).[9] While Hess echoes the aristocratic otherness of the classical vampire, blood bears more cultural and psychic resonance. His ceaseless craving for blood, an eternal life driven by appetite, becomes marked by the trigger of the Congolese music and hallucinatory scenes of running in a field and greetings from a Myrthian queen (Mabel King). In this way, his vampiric state dissuades the classical vampiric connotations of blood in terms of a bestial drive or sexual excess. Throughout, blood and the hungering aurality signifies a dizzying Africanist presence as much as it does the horror of the undead.

"There are times when the white critic must sit down and listen. If he cannot listen and learn, then he must not concern himself with black creativity."

—Bill Gunn[10]

Sometimes Black critics must sit down and listen too. Really, all critics must learn to concentrate on film blackness as a way to refuse the intractable tendency to exclusively frame the idea of black film in terms of its measure of correspondence to lived experience. *Ganja & Hess* continues to thrive and bewilder in part due to its ambivalence towards these totalizing readings of the film as merely reflectionist allegory. The film's meditation on addiction proffers a modernist wake, death accreting in three acts.

The final section of the film begins with the arrival of Meda's wife, Ganja (Marlene Clark). She and Hess eventually fall in love and marry as Hess then turns her into a vampire by stabbing her with the Myrthian dagger. The improvisational range and chemistry of Marlene Clark and Duane Jones greatly expanded on the original designs of the screenplay. Moreover, the portraiture gestures of James E. Hinton's cinematography evocatively frame their romance within a mise-en-scène abounding with an aesthetic attention to blackness and desire. The coupling of Ganja and Hess begs the question of whether it's necrophilia when you're both dead. Is this stanklove?

They are the living dead who are not wholly expired flesh but instead circulate as arrested flesh. They are bodies that defy the chrononormative regulation of Black life.[11] But, Hess ultimately wills himself to die. He arrives in the church that appeared at the start of the film. Have we left a flashback and entered the real time of the film? From the pulpit, Reverend Williams leads the parishioners in the singing of "Just As I Am" as Hess stumbles in tears down the aisle towards the stage. Broken and breaking still, Hess's movement with the sounding solicitation of the song produces a *body as acoustic event*.[12] There in the church, he becomes concussed and sanctified as a cleansed body—a body that had been marked with the cool allure of refinement is now revealed to be achingly dispossessed. He entered the church as an empty vessel and leaves filled by the fermenting glory of faith and humanity. Can the undead submit to a power greater than their suspended state of perishing? Hess's death is a suicide by standing in the shadow of the cross. His resignation mirrors Meda's self-destruction. But, while Hess offers no explicit explanation perhaps an answer can be found within the delirium of Meda's suicide note from earlier in the film:

To the Black male children,
Philosophy is a prison.
It disregards the uncustomary things about you.
The result of individual thought is applicable only to itself.
There is a dreadful need in man to teach.
It destroys the pure instinct to learn.
The navigator learns from the stars.
The stars teach nothing.
The sun opens the mind and sheds light on the flowers.
The eyes shame the pages of any book.
Gesture destroys concept.
Involvement mortifies vanity.
You are the despised of the earth.
That is as if you were water in the desert.
To be adored on this planet is to be a symbol of success.
And you must not succeed on any terms because life is endless.
You are as nameless as a flower.
You are the child of Venus and her natural affection is lust.
She will touch your belly with her tongue but you must not suffer in it,
for love is all there is and you are cannon fodder in its defense.

This philosophic treatise on blackness, epistemology, becoming, abasement, and desire offers traces of a script and vestiges of a struggle. The intensity of the prose deliberates on living and self-destruction, but the message is closer to the cycling of beginnings, middles, and ends that are assembled as an exquisite corpse editorial. Hess cannot convince Ganja to join him in a true death/rebirth. Instead, the final sequence of the film details Ganja looking out the window, noting with a smile the arising of her new companion. In the end, there is only hunger. In the end, there is only blood.

NOTES

1 Harrison M. J. Sherrod, "The Blood of the Thing (Is the Truth of the Thing): Viral Pathogens and Uncanny Ontologies in *Ganja & Hess*" in *Beyond Blaxploitation*, ed. Novotny Lawrence and Gerald R. Butters, Jr. (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2016), 106
2 Allen Weiss, "Ten Theses on Monsters and Monstrosity," *The Drama Review* 48, no. 1 (Spring 2004): 125.
3 Clyde Taylor, "Bill Gunn...Climbing The Seven Monied Medias," *Black Renaissance* 10, 2/3 (Summer 2010): 101.
4 See M. Boyce Gillespie, *Film Blackness: American Cinema and the Idea of Black Film* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016).
5 Greg Tate, "Bill Gunn, 1934-89, " *Village Voice*, 25 April 1989, 98.
6 For more on this issue of shifting focalization, see Manthia Diawara and Phyllis R. Klotman, "*Ganja & Hess*: Vampires, Sex, and Addictions," *Black American Literature Forum* 25, no. 2 (Summer, 1991): 299-314.
7 Hector Lino, Jr., "Interview with Bill Gunn," *Impressions: A Black Arts and Culture Magazine* 1, no. 2 (Spring 1975): 62.
8 Slavoj Žižek, *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture* (Cambridge, MA.: MIT Press, 1991), 23.
9 For a more on the elaborate consideration of the intricacies of the soundtrack, see Morgan Woolsey, "Hearing and Feeling the Black Vampire: Queer Affects in the Film Soundtrack," *Current Musicology* 106 (Spring 2020): 9-27.
10 Bill Gunn, "To Be a Black Artist" *New York Times*, 13 May 1973, 121.
11 In *Time Binds*, Elizabeth Freeman defines chrononormativity as "the use of time to organize individual human bodies toward maximum productivity" (1). Furthermore she contends, "Chrononormativity is a mode of implantation, a technique by which institutional forces come to seem like somatic facts" (3). *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).
12 See Paul C. Jasen, *Low End Theory: Bass, Bodies and the Materiality of Sonic Experience* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2017), 23.

To Be a Black Artist

Bill Gunn

Published in *The New York Times*, May 13, 1973

Reprinted faithfully

TO THE EDITOR:

There are times when the white critic must sit down and listen. If he cannot listen and learn, then he must not concern himself with black creativity.

A children's story I wrote speaks of a black male child that dreamed of a strong white golden-haired prince who would come and save him from being black. He came, and as time passed and the relationship moved forward, it was discovered that indeed the black child was the prince and he had saved his friend from being white. That, too, is possible.

I have always tried to imagine the producers waiting anxiously for the black reviewers' opinions of "The Sound of Music" or "A Clockwork Orange."

I want to say that it is a terrible thing to be a black artist in this country—for reasons too private to expose to the arrogance of white criticism.

One white critic left my film "Ganja & Hess," after 20 minutes and reviewed the entire film. Another was to see three films in one day and review them all. This is a crime.

Three years of three different people's lives graded in one afternoon by a complete stranger to the artist and to the culture. A. H. Weiler states in his review of "Ganja & Hess" that a doctor of anthropology killed his assistant and is infected by a blood disease and becomes immortal. But this is not so, Mr. Weiler, the assistant *committed suicide*. I know this film does not address you, but in that auditorium you might have heard more than you were able to over the sounds of your own voice. Another critic wondered where was the race problem. If he looks closely, he will find it in his own review.

If I were white, I would probably be called "fresh and different." If I were European, "Ganja & Hess" might be "that little film you must see." Because I am black, I do not even deserve the pride that one American feels for another when he discovers that a fellow countryman's film has been selected as the only American film to be shown during "Critic's Week" at the Cannes Film Festival, May, 1973. Not one white critic from any of the major newspapers even mentioned it.

I am very proud of my actors in "Ganja & Hess." They worked hard, with a dedication to their art and race that is obviously foreign to the critics. I want to thank them and my black sisters and brothers who have expressed only gratitude and love for my effort.

When I first came into the "theatre," black women who were actresses were referred to as "great gals" by white directors and critics. Marlene Clark, one of the most beautiful women and actresses I have ever known, was referred to as "a brown skinned looker" (New York Post). That kind of disrespect could not have been cultivated in 110 minutes. It must have taken at least a good 250 years.

Your newspapers and critics must realize that they are controlling black theater and film creativity with white criticism. Maybe if the black film craze continues, the white press might even find it necessary to employ black criticism. But if you can stop the craze in its tracks, maybe that won't be necessary.

Attuned to the World, Disorganizing Its Logics: Bill Gunn as an Actor

Nicholas Forster

One of the first questions I'm frequently asked when speaking with people who knew Bill Gunn is: *how did you get interested in him?* The origins of any project are always multifarious, and never easy to pin down. There could be intellectual questions that might drive a biographical project. One might be interested in tracing a personal connection or uncovering an emotional attachment. Perhaps, there is some cultural-historical shift that appears emblematized in a single figure. Still, what struck me from the very first time I saw Gunn was how, as an actor, he expressed empathy. He seemed to visualize what it meant to relate to others.

Writing about acting is notoriously hard but some performers seem to unfurl that challenge through the revelation of feeling. In his philosophical examination of Classical Hollywood, *Pursuit of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage*, Stanley Cavell notes that Cary Grant had a particular ability on-screen to "convey…mental preoccupation… that makes him spiritually inaccessible to those around him." In other words, Grant was able to reveal what it looks like to think. To me, Gunn offered something quite different; he conveyed an awareness and understanding of others. From the delicate way he communicates pathos, slouching in a chair while sharing anecdotes with Dr. Hess Green in *Ganja & Hess* (1973) to the tonal rise and fall of his voice when Victor tells Sara, "I'm a genuine success! Your husband is a genuine black success!" in *Losing Ground* (1982), Gunn did a difficult thing—he externalized his character's interiority. His sensitivity was not only to the characters around him but to the world he was a part of. He gave weight to that space in his tenderness towards being.

Gunn was a poet, and whether on the page or in his performances, he seemed to know the symbolic power of a small gesture. In his micromovements, it was as though everything in the world mattered. Whether by lurching slightly forward in the midst of apologizing, or in the ever so noticeable tilt of his head as he was listening to someone, Gunn's characters, even in small roles, carried both a past and were attuned to how the present vibrated with possibility. So much was in his use of hands, whether folded, clenched, or raised in a fist, there was something to notice. In *The Interns* (1962), one of Gunn's earliest appearances in film, he grasps a pole, cradling it as he begins to hug his head tightly in. When he finally lets go, his hand slides off, as if to suggest this is a world of friction.

When Gunn moved to New York in the early 1950s, he carried with him a history of performance. Though he had enrolled in community acting classes in Philadelphia, his earliest training came from his family. Both of his parents found success in the world of Black vaudeville decades earlier. Gunn's father was a singer and comedian, and his mother, Louise, was a dancer and chorine who set the ground trembling alongside iconic blues artists like Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith. She was eager to be a star, and that dream was only partially fulfilled in her life. The pain of incompleteness stung even as it energized—pulsating with an awareness of what-could-have-been that abject failure would have foreclosed. That unfulfilled dream became Gunn's inheritance.

In an industry hostile to anyone who refused categorization, Gunn frayed the edges of

every label thrust on him. When he auditioned, he came across the peculiar predicament of being seen, and was told that he was either "too dark" or "too light." His first major break came when he landed a small role in the 1954 Broadway adaptation of André Gide's *The Immoralist*. Gunn was cast in the role of Dolit, but he was also James Dean's understudy for the Arab character Bachir. Neither Gunn nor Dean were of Middle Eastern descent and the two bonded over the troubling standards of Broadway, in which a white kid from Indiana and a Black Philadelphian would take the stage as a persona that Gide described as "a little dark complexioned Arab."

Fairly quickly, Gunn established himself as a supporting player that could bring charm and ballast to whatever roles were available. The first Golden Age of television was taking shape in New York, where anthology series including *Studio One* and *The Stranger* were legitimating the emerging medium as a new art form. Like so many other actors of his generation, from Anthony Perkins and Shelley Winters to Paul Newman and Eva Marie Saint, Gunn found work on these programs. Notably, he appeared on a series of shows produced by WOR including *Harlem Detective* and *Carmen in Harlem*, a five-night live broadcast adaptation of Bizet's play co-staring Billie Allen. The so-called "method" was in vogue and Gunn studied with a number of innovative acting teachers. Along the way, he became part of an alternative scene, hanging out at the Actors Studio and spending time with Dean and Martin Landau, and developing friendships with Roscoe Lee Browne and Montgomery Clift. Dean was not only a friend, he was also a role model, clear in the fact that Gunn hired Dean's agent, Jane Deacy, to represent him. Within the entertainment landscape that connected the stage and the cinema, Gunn developed a reputation. In 1957, he joined a group of artists and actors including Lillian Gish and Ethel Waters on a State Department trip to West Berlin. Nevertheless, even if the young Philadelphian had charisma as an actor, he didn't fit in.

Gunn's talents were clear, but casting directors couldn't make sense of the man. On an early resume, Gunn's race was not listed, but it was clear in the annotation "Good XTRA." He had been on Broadway, appeared on television, and starred in small but significant productions throughout New York. However, credentials mattered less than perceived identity. As a light skinned, handsome, Black actor, he added color to the background, fitting in with the cultural logic of Hollywood's antiblackness. He was regarded as a kind of appendage or prop that could bring to the fore more marketable stars. He had the talent and beauty of the luminaries around him, but industrial racism and his own interest in writing roles—rather than in only inhabiting them—shifted his trajectory. As an outlaw artist, Gunn worked in the system, even as he sought to break open the omnipresent false niceties that belied structural impossibilities.

In 1964, after a decade of being considered and turned down for countless roles, he told *Variety* that "when a good part for a Negro actor does come along, they always offer it to Sidney Poitier. If he turns it down, they rewrite it for a white actor." This was, as

the *Variety* headline proclaimed, "Bill Gunn's Beef." Gunn was intimately familiar with the machinations of Hollywood and the way rejection could sting. Even though he and Lou Gossett Jr., who at different times played the lead in the play *Take a Giant Step*, were celebrated, when a filmic adaptation was produced, neither was cast. At the time there had been no major Hollywood film helmed by a Black director. Stokely Carmichael hadn't called for Black Power and even Poitier hadn't been given the space to slap a white man in the face, as would happen in 1967's *In the Heat of the Night*. To criticize Hollywood as racist in one of the major trade journals was to refuse the terms of engagement. The industry took note. Gunn became one who, though lauded for his talent, would be labeled as being "difficult to work with." Following the *Variety* piece, Gunn appeared in only a handful of television programs and Hollywood films in the following decades.

That same year, Gunn's first novel, *All the Rest Have Died*, was published. As an actor in Hollywood, producers tried to stuff Gunn into preformulated archetypes. As a writer, Gunn peppered his novel with autobiographical details that reflected his refusal of nearly every category of identity:

> *I am not concerned with what I am racially. I am nothing and I am everything... I do not trust people who pass out titles and categories to keep racial order. I am racially disorganized... I am not black or brown or yellow or white...that is only the exterior.*

Although much of the novel charts the protagonist's journey through the New York theatre, Gunn's understanding of identity here points to the bind of working in Hollywood. As an actor he had a unique talent to project the inner workings of his characters. He worked in a business that relied less on that ability than on reductive understandings of the exterior. Gunn hoped that, as a writer, he could escape the labels that defined him by and against everything surrounding him. He could mark out an identity rather than inhabiting and contorting himself to fit the thin imaginative spaces of others. Even if the work wasn't published, even if a film went unproduced, he could further self-actualize through writing.

The narrative of a shattered dream can be dangerously enticing. Whether it is something we've experienced, or another's journey we witness; whether it is clear in the moments of hope torn apart across a lifetime through a thousand cuts, or in the brief instant of crisis, the rise and fall of a career presents a captivating story. But the narrative here is just that: a story that exchanges the very real struggles of power, race, and creativity for that more easily understandable sense of disenfranchisement.

Gunn may have been denied by Hollywood, yet in his own writings—fiction, poetry, plays, and screenplays—he could, in his words, "create my own world. I could create my own people... [to create a movie is to] be in the mi[d]st of somebody else's world...not their reality, but their world...the fantastical things really fascinated me the most." In this, both Gunn's life and career refute the narratives often ascribed to Black artists, and his portrait remains necessarily hard to grasp within a world where prefigured templates offer a way to make our world cohere.

Possibilities That Might Have Been

Pearl Bowser

Published in *Black Film Review*, Spring 1989

Bill Gunn's death sent a shock wave through the community of artists, friends, and supporters who worked with him. The loss of this sensitive creative spirit leaves a void in each of us. It is difficult to separate Bill from the characters he created on stage or in the movies, so effortless and natural were his performances. As a part of the audience I often felt connected to some part of him during his performance.

Bill...always so full of life...passionately pursuing his craft...he wrote prodigiously. Once he showed me a huge chest jammed packed with manuscripts he had written: plays, poems, scripts, many unpublished but still treasures he hoped to see come to life one day. It is difficult to write about Bill, hard to find words that accurately describe the small part of him I knew mainly through his film *Ganja & Hess*. Watching Bill on screen or in a play or just listening to him talk about his work reinforced the awe I felt the first time I saw *Ganja & Hess*. I never quite got over his referring to me as his "fairy Godmother" years later when the original version of his film was restored. It was his way of saying thanks for the film.

I met Bill shortly before *Ganja & Hess* opened in 1970. Jack Jordan, one of the producers invited me to a meeting with his partner and some of the production staff to talk about audience development and possible non-theatrical outlets after the Broadway opening. Jack planned a flashy champagne celebration to kick off the premiere. He probably knew the film wouldn't make it past the gauntlet of white American critics that had already panned it at the Cannes Festival in spite of the public enthusiasm and praise from French critics. Within a week of its opening *Ganja & Hess* was pulled and sold to a distributor who re-cut, edited and changed the title to *Blood Couple*. Bill was angry about the mutilation of his work and refused to be associated with the new release. Fortunately one 35mm print of the original had been missed by the "butcher" and was sent to Bill. For nearly a decade the original version was hand carried to numerous screenings and became one of the most demanded films in the Museum of Modern Art Collection. MoMA stored the print in its vaults as a courtesy to Bill and would only let it out with his consent. By 1980 the film was about to be withdrawn again but this time because of fear of damage due to extended usage and improper handling.

The print was stretched and some reels were badly scratched. Bill was anxious to keep the print in circulation but it was out of the question for MoMA or anyone to risk investing a substantial amount of money restoring the print while there might be legal questions about ownership or rights. I volunteered to raise the money through the audience that had been supportive of Bill in the past. John Gottenberg lent technical advice, Allan Siegel (then president of Third World Newsreel) agreed to allow me to use Third World Newsreel's credit line. And Bill graciously agreed to be bused, flown or driven to present the film as often as needed. It was a hard decision for him because writing was nourishment for him, and he preferred to work in the seclusion of his home in Nyack. In less than a year we had enough advance bookings to pay for a 16mm reduction negative.

Audiences across the U.S. and some in England and France, helped to make it possible. I often wonder what might have been if *Ganja & Hess* had been allowed to reach its audience when it was first released and Bill Gunn had continued to write and direct films. The gifts he left us only hint at the possibilities of what might have been.

Portrait of Bill Gunn and Pearl Bowser. Copyright PJ Bowser Productions

Contributor Biographies

Hilton Als, a staff writer at *The New Yorker*, won the 2017 Pulitzer Prize for criticism. He is the author of *The Women*, *White Girls*, and *Alice Neel: Uptown*. He is an associate professor of writing at Columbia University.

Dr. Janus Adams is an Emmy Award-winning journalist, historian, author, and the host of public radio's "The Janus Adams Show" and podcast. With more than 500 articles, essays, and columns to her credit, her work has been featured in *Essence* and *Ms. Magazine*, *The New York Times*, *Newsday*, *USA Today*, and *The Washington Post*. Her master's is the nation's first graduate degree in Black Studies. Dr. Adams was a close friend of Bill Gunn and worked on the production of *Ganja & Hess*.

Ruun Nuur is an independent cinematic practitioner and co-creator of NO EVIL EYE, a nomadic microcinema.

Ishmael Reed was first published in *The Empire Star*, published by the hero of the 1921 Tulsa Rebellion, A.J. Smitherman. He was 16 years old. Since then he has published many volumes of writing. Reed released Bill Gunn's novel *Rhinestone Sharecropping* (I. Reed Books) and his play *Black Picture Show* (Reed Cannon & Johnson).

Michael Boyce Gillespie is a film professor at The City College of New York and The Graduate Center, CUNY. His research focuses on film theory, black visual and expressive culture, popular music, and contemporary art. He is the author of *Film Blackness: American Cinema and the Idea of Black Film* (Duke University Press, 2016); co-editor with Lisa Uddin of *Black One Shot*, an art criticism series devoted to the art of blackness on ASAP/J; and editor of *Crisis Harmonies*, a music criticism series on ASAP/J. His recent work has appeared in *Black Light: A Retrospective of International Black Cinema*, *Flash Art*, *Unwatchable*, *Film Quarterly*, and *Ends of Cinema*. His current book project is entitled *The Case of the 3 Sided Dream*.

Nicholas Forster is a Lecturer in African American Studies and Film & Media Studies at Yale University. He is writing a biography of Bill Gunn and has published articles in *The Village Voice*, *Film Quarterly*, and *The Los Angeles Review of Books*.

Pearl Bowser is a celebrated scholar, author, archivist, filmmaker, independent distributor, and remains a tireless champion of independent cinema, and filmmakers of color, through her years of cultivating audiences and insisting on inclusion for these often marginalized cinematic works and talents, particularly with her own world-renowned work on Oscar Micheaux. In her persistent advocacy for Bill Gunn and *Ganja & Hess*, Bowser is singularly responsible for the film's availability today in the original intended version, by maintaining and distributing its only existent print. Since 1970, she has curated interactive film programs in Europe, Asia, South America, Africa, and throughout the United States. Bowser's producing credits include *Mississippi Triangle* (1984), *Namibia Independence Now* (1986), and *Stories About Us* (1988), and she co-directed the acclaimed PBS documentary *Midnight Ramble: Oscar Micheaux and the Story of Race Movies* (1994). In 2016, Pearl Bowser was officially recognized for donating an extensive collection of over 200 African-American and African-Diasporic films to the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC), forming the bedrock of the institution's prestigious film archives. Bowser is currently working on several projects, including a multi-year collaboration with independent filmmakers Lisa Collins and Mark Schwartzburt on *Oscar's Comeback*, their award-winning feature documentary now in post-production.

Jake Perlin is the Artistic and Programming Director for Metrograph in New York. Previously he was Associate Curator at BAMcinématek, and in 2010 programmed the retrospective "The Groundbreaking Bill Gunn" and co-produced with Bret Wood the re-release of *Personal Problems*. Perlin is co-publisher with Jim Colvill of Film Desk Books, which has released writing by Lillian Ross, previously untranslated interviews with Marguerite Duras, Jean-Luc Godard, and Pier Paolo Pasolini, and distributed I. Reed Books' original printings of Bill Gunn's *Rhinestone Sharecropping* and *Black Picture Show*.

This publication accompanies the exhibition *Till They Listen: Bill Gunn Directs America*, on view at Artists Space from June 5 – August 15, 2021. The exhibition is organized by Artists Space, Hilton Als and Jake Perlin, in collaboration with Sam Waymon, Nicholas Forster, Awoye Timpo, Chiz Schultz, and Ishmael Reed

Exhibition support is provided by Marieluise Hessel.

Additional program support for Artists Space is provided by The Friends of Artists Space, Lambent Foundation Fund of Tides Foundation, The New York City Department of Cultural Affairs, The New York State Council on the Arts with the support of Governor Andrew M. Cuomo and the New York State Legislature.

Very special thanks to Derek Baron, Andrea Battleground, Thomas Beard and Ed Halter (Light Industry), Cheryl Beredo, Joy Bivins, and Shola Lynch (The Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture), Amber Bertin (Black Film Center/ Archive, Indiana University), Carla Blank, Curtis Caesar John and Jacqui Brown (The Luminal Theater), Lisa Collins, Danielle Cordovez (The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts), Hope Cullinan (The New York Public Library), Tom Cummings, Nicholas Forster, Amy Heller (Milestone Films), Jonathan Hertzberg (Kino Lorber), Marshall Johnson, Carman Moore, Sarah O'Connell, Chris Poggiali and Paul DeCirce (Temple of Sclock), Queens Museum of Art, Ishmael Reed, Israel Rodriguez, Marianna Rossett, Chiz Schultz, Seret Scott, Alyssa Simmons (The Public Theater), Jamie Stevens, Awoye Timpo, Sam Waymon, John Williams, Bret Wood, Kevin Young and to all this publication's contributors.

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