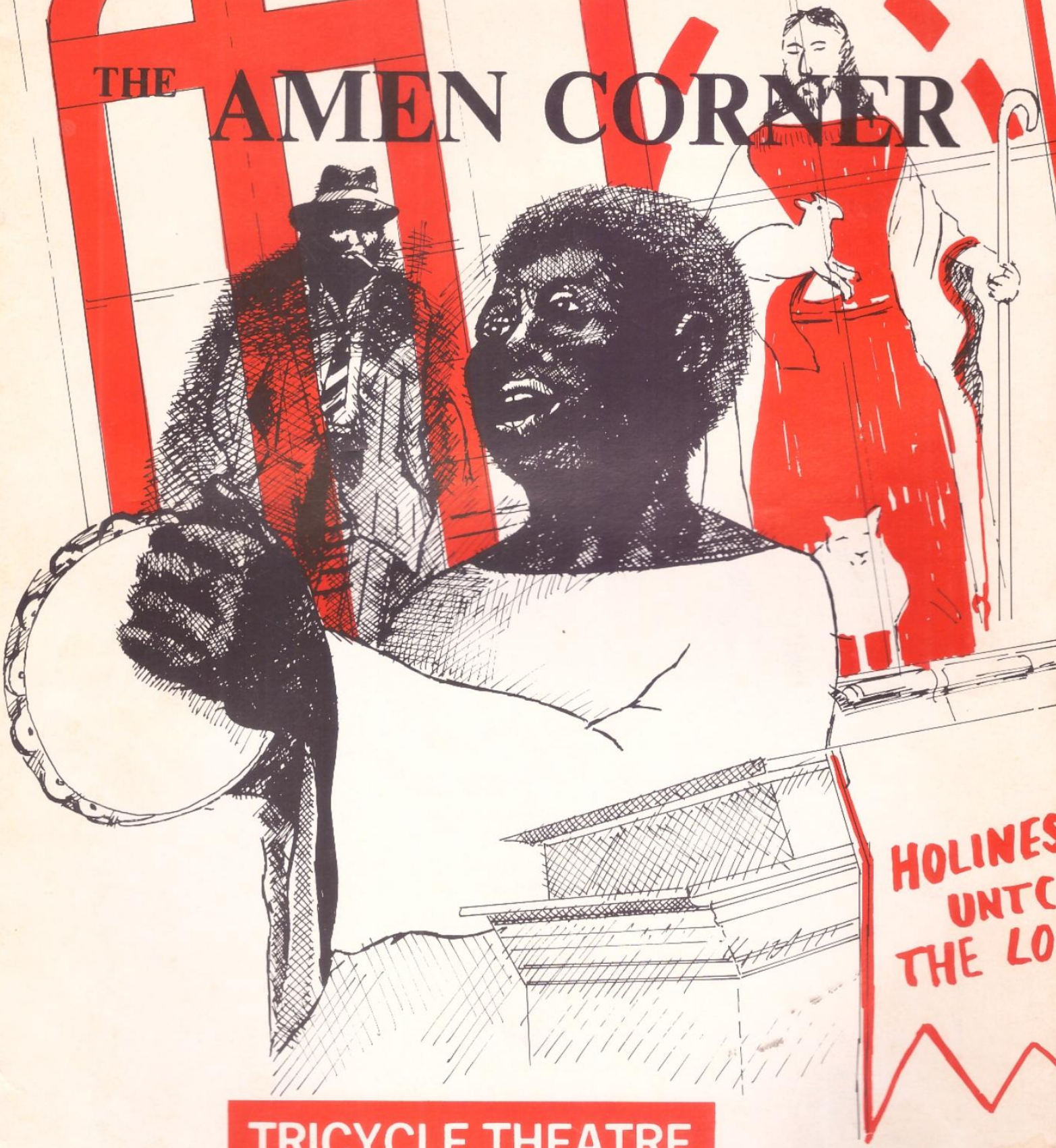
CARIB THEATRE PRODUCTIONS PRESENTS

JAMES BALDWIN'S

THE AMEN CORNER



TRICYCLE THEATRE

Brent Leisure
Arts & Entertainments

Subsidised by the
LONDON BOROUGHS
GRANT SCHEME

The Tricycle Theatre was founded in 1980 by Ken Chubb, Martin Cook and Shirley Barrie as an initiative of Brent Borough Council and the GLC.

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THE FINANCIAL TIMES

21st January, 1987

The Amen Corner/Tricycle

Antony Thorncroft

James Baldwin's first play—there has only been one other during his long career as America's leading black writer—was first performed in 1955 and has never had a sustained run in the UK. Carib Theatre Productions earn brownie points for this revival, directed by Anton Phillips under the beady eye of the author.

It is very much a period piece, with three wordy, not to say worthy, acts, unambiguous characters, strong dramatic moments, and enough sentiment to sink a battleship. It is a play about the black experience—the comfort religion offers to the poor of Harlem — but touches a wider audience. It is slightly mawkish, occasionally maudlin, but obviously a work by a major talent.

Sister Margaret is as stern with her congregation at Amen Corner as any Old Testament Prophet — even reading the funny papers is frowned on because it distracts the mind from God. She needs all her faith when she is tested like Job — her flock whoring after false gods, her son hooked on jazz rather than Jesus, and her ne'er-do-well husband returning to die in her back room.

There is no shortage of plot as the brothers and sisters, jealous of Sister Margaret's righteousness and groaning under the weight of the weekly collection, plan her overthrow while, at the same time, the domestic drama plays itself out.

Baldwin shows his youth in pushing the action along in a series of contrived, over-written scenes—between father and son, man and wife—but he gives Carmen Munroe, as the pastor, such a meaty part that the longueurs cause relatively few wriggles. She positively gleams with intensity as we share her martyrdom.

Thankfully all the leading roles are strongly taken—by Al Matthews as the prodigal, horn-blowing husband, and by Sylvester Wililams, who in a matter of minutes, switches his loyalty as the son from mother to father. There is little comfort here for feminists in the conclusion that a woman is better off sticking by her man rather than her God but that was the golden rule in the mid fifties.

And if some of the dialogue is little more than posturing there is always the music to lift the spirits. There are plenty of opportunities for gospel singing, with the Tricycle regulars playing, as usual, an active role. Marsha Roddy designed the two-tier stage—church at the back, domestic quarters down below. There are fewer jokes than the audience uncovered, but there is still enough genuine humanity in this story of faith tested to make it a welcome re-discovery.

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THE TIMES 21st January, 1987

The Amen Corner
Tricycle

James Baldwin's first play arrives in London, more than 30 years after he wrote it, in this outstanding production by Anton Phillips and Carib Theatre.

The Vogue dismissed an off-Broadway production as "shamelessly maudlin", probably because Baldwin, without shame, dares to suggest that a death-bed reunion might be capable of affecting the life of the survivor. So much for *The Vogue*'s understanding of humankind.

Against a background of the hymns and preaching of a black American church – literally there in the background of the stage with altar and piano and Jesus in stained glass – the play focuses on the home life of the charismatic woman preacher.

For 10 hard years Sister Margaret Alexander has been herding her flock of sinners into her Holy Ghost Station and on towards the Lord, preaching against liquor, jazz musicians, cakes and ale. Baldwin shows, almost in passing, the fragility of this sort of religion, where a leader's hold over the led is only as safe as their last shouted "Amen!".

Margaret's position is lost once her feet are found to be clay. What Baldwin is telling us is that this is our own mortal clay, and as someone else put it, You must love one another or die.

Margaret's trial begins when her long-lost husband Luke staggers back to her still clutching the trombone that once brought him fame if little money. For years their life together has been unmentionable in the family home. Their son David is knotted up with guilt at his own longing to play jazz on the piano, and one of the core speeches at the centre of the play is the long-delayed confrontation between father and son.

The son (Sylvester Williams), hurt, trying not to be judgemental, torn between the ivories and the Lord, and Luke (a masterly performance by Al Matthews), flat on his back on a brass bedstead, clutching the mouthpiece of his trombone, denied the chance to clutch his wife, gasping out the human need for love. I feel sure *The Vogue* decided that was maudlin.

The other major scenes are those between Luke and Margaret, a scene in each act, in which Baldwin sets out three stages in her growth of self-perception, which Carmen Munroe magnificently presents to us, without sentimentality, without histrionics (reserved for the pulpit) but with a restrained, refined skill that ends by being moving and just.

Around this central focus the life of the congregation seeths on. Baldwin has a marvellous ability for showing characters twitching with resentment which they mask behind weasel declarations of support neatly undermined with venom. Alibe Parsons and Stacey Zuckerman are expert rebels here. A great evening.

Jeremy Kingston

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CITY LIMITS 21st January, 1987

■**'The Amen Corner'** by James Baldwin (Tricycle)
From the first breathtaking blaze of vocal harmony, Anton Phillips' pellucid production of Baldwin's mid-fifties classic evinces a remarkably correct sense of time and place, drawing on religious ritual to create a captivating theatrical representation of spiritual celebration and physical hardship. The excellent Carmen Munroe, moist of eye but full of steely resolve, plays Sister Margaret—the pastor of a 'store front' harlem church who, seeking refuge from her jazz musician husband and the harsh realities of life and pain of love, has turned to the holy ghost for comfort and strength. Over-protective towards her eighteen-year-old son and demanding of her congregation, Sister Margaret eventually understands the power of love, but at a terrible cost—her husband, son and church. Baldwin's sharp, funny script cunningly mixes simplicity and subtlety—hooking the audience with a gripping narrative and skilful characterisation, while also revealing the injustice of a world where black babies die of starvation, and 'folks like us ain't got nothing, and ain't supposed to have nothing; we're supposed to live on the joys of the Lord'. The acting is good, the singing superb.
(Lyn Gardner)

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'The Amen Corner' (Tricycle)
Jame Baldwin's first play, set in a small parlour church in Harlem and here neatly staged (design by Marsha Roddy) by Carib Theatre under the able direction of Anton Phillips is a touching, humorous and nudgingly satirical look at the roles, relationships and revelations existing between men, women and their church. Pastor Sister Margaret Alexander is a self-righteous matriarch who rules and guides her flock with an intimidating blend of harsh kindness and devotional determination. Through this character Baldwin explores the nature of power — not just that of the Lord but the power of one person over another and above all the power of the mind to control emotion — that eternal struggle of the physical with the spiritual. When her renegade husband whom she left ten years previously, turns up dying of sin and cigarettes Margaret (lovely controlled performance from Carmen Munroe) has to face the glowing embers of a physical love bitterly repressed and denied, and finally accepts the strength of her own true emotional self. Her inner conflict is reflected in the power struggle within her congregation and the whole moves to the rhythm of gospel songs. This is a fine production, expertly staged and excellently performed. Praise be.
Helen Rose

CRITICS' CHOICE

– **'The House of Bernarda Alba'** (Globe)
The transfer is every bit as good as the original. The combination of Spanish director Nuria Espert and a remarkable British cast produces creative fireworks.
2 **'The Amen Corner'** (Tricycle)
Excellent production of Baldwin's classic which moves to the rhythm of gospel songs.
3 **'The Triumph of Love'** (Gate)
Gate's adventurous policy continues apace with Marivaux's deliberations on love, friendship and justice.
4 **'Twelfth Night'** (Donmar Warehouse)
Declan and Nick do it again, delving into the text to find new romantic relationships to be exposed.
5 **'Faust Part I'** (Young Vic)
Welcome return of the Rude Mechanicals's energetic version of Goethe's masterpiece.

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