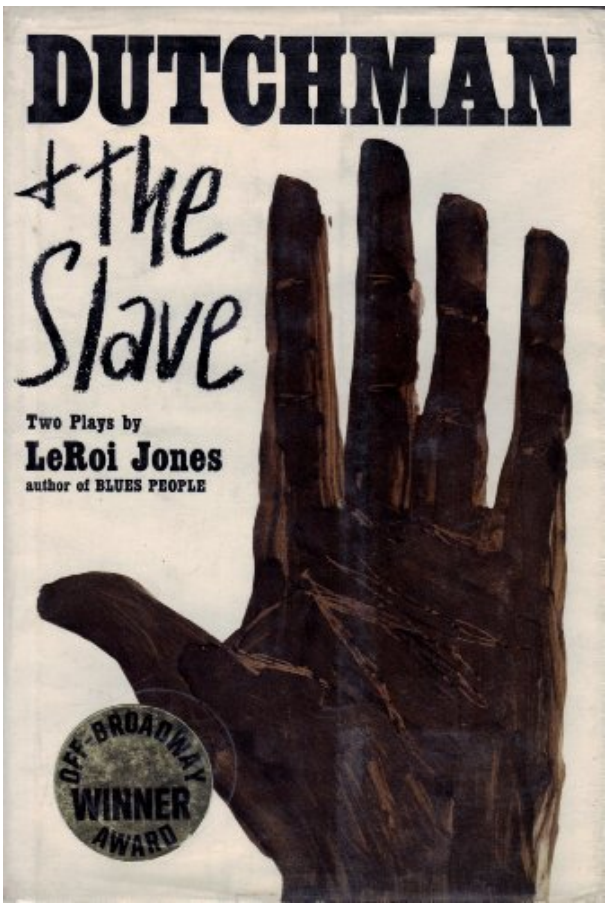
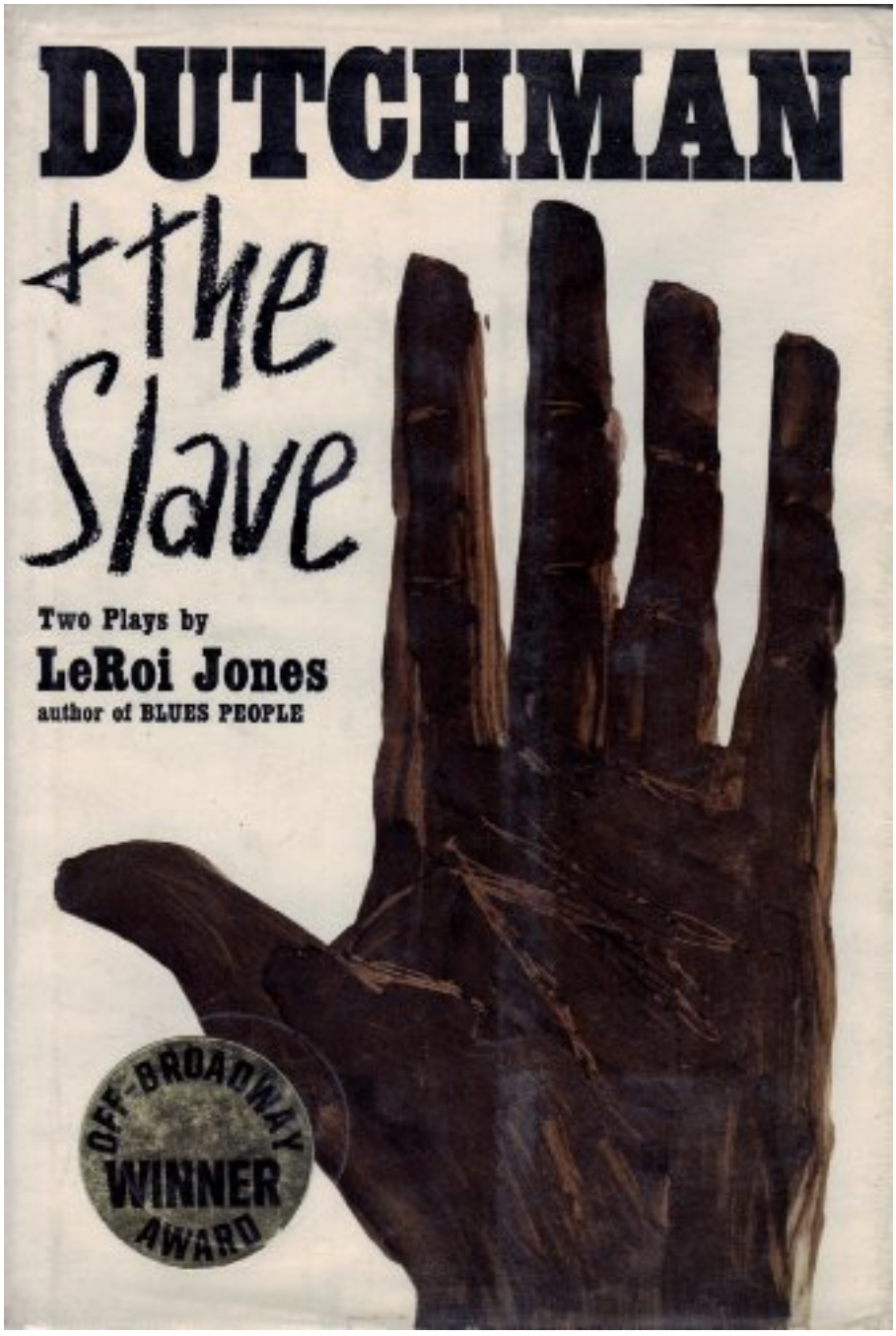
DUTCHMAN & THE SLAVE BY LEROI JONES (BARAKA)





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WILLIAM MORROW AND COMPANY, NY 1964. First Edition assumed with none stated.

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- Binding: Hardcover
- 88 pages

Most helpful customer reviews

12 of 12 people found the following review helpful.
5 Stars for Dutchman, 2 Stars for The Slave
By Kevin L. Nenstiel
This slim omnibus volume combines the two major plays of one of America's most significant living poets. Critics make much about the racial import of these plays, but they are more damning than that: both say that American society is based inherently on inevitable divisions and gaps. The difference between these two is that only one has stood the test of time as a theatrical experience.

LeRoi Jones, now called Amiri Baraka, was one of the original Beats, though his name is often unjustly left off that roster. He was instrumental to the Black Mountain Poets and has remained innovative for decades, long after other poets have settled into comforting conventionality. These plays are more like poems than dramatic presentations in their finger-popping, jazzy argot. You don't so much follow a narrative as drink in the gestalt the characters' language creates.

"Dutchman" takes place on a New York subway car. Lula, an oversexed white woman, sees young black Clay, with his necktie and unread magazine, as a... well, what DOES she see him as? Students and scholars argue this. But her aggressive forwardness progresses from mere provocation to overt race baiting, cracking the hard shell Clay has carefully built himself. The action of the play constantly ascends, culminating in a tiny race riot of language and power.

This play is mythical in overtones as the characters push back on each other. The title implies that this subway is the Flying Dutchman, doomed never to make port, suggesting this conflict will go on eternally. Gaps of age, sex, and class join forces with race to show how these two people can never be reconciled. As the characters' mutual torment moves from simple vicious taunting to outright persecution, the scene becomes more and more crowded, and the spectacle more public.

"The Slave" uses similar racial incitement in a more realistic setting. With the race revolution finally in motion, its leader, a black poet named Walker, barges in on his white ex-wife, Grace, and her new husband, Easley, demanding the return of his daughters. But his motivations are more complex than that--we have to wonder if he even knows himself what he hopes to accomplish by this invasion.

Jones tries to capture a similar heightened poetic tenor as he did in "Dutchman," but somehow it doesn't pop in the same way. The characters speak like they're reading from textbooks, and the poetry of dialogue only

pokes through intermittently. The explicit use of characternyms is a little too much like late Tennessee Williams for comfort. And Walker's revolution, though doubtless heartfelt, seems a little too pat for the level of discontent the characters evidently want to feel.

Considering that Jones left a white wife and two daughters to write revolutionary racial verse, it's hard not to think this is his own wish fulfillment. But that's also too simple an outlook, since at the end Walker, the author's proxy, is no figure a high-minded idealist like Jones would want to be. So what is going on? And why do the characters talk like a manifesto?

There's a reason why, forty-five years later, "Dutchman" is still part of the American theatrical repertory, and "The Slave" is limited to literature and African American Studies classes. The former is a propulsive theatrical experience, a walk through an undiscovered circle of hell, and it hits audiences where we continue to live. The latter is a mix of soapbox and self-criticism that doesn't know where it's going.

Jones, as Baraka, remains a vital force in American letters. Read his poetry or, if you have the privilege, listen to him speak. And definitely read and see "Dutchman," because it's a true contemporary classic. "The Slave" is a curiosity, and while it makes enlightening companion reading, that's all it's ever likely to be.

3 of 3 people found the following review helpful.
A classic
By J. Silva
LeRoi Jones, now known as Amiri Baraka, wrote Dutchman in 1964, but its themes of racism and fear still resonate today. A must for anyone studying African American literature and contemporary drama -- it is a seminal work. The Slave is less successful -- its message is muddled and the dialogue stilted -- yet it is worth reading to get a complete view of Baraka's work.

2 of 6 people found the following review helpful.
civil rights
By Teresa Svach
Wow. I think this play portrays an aspect of the black community that cannot be felt by any other community without some feelings of disingenuity. The rage present in the play is overwhelming. The sense of danger and loss is also present, but more subtly so. This play is also very ambiguous and wanting interpretation. I say "wanting interpretation" because Dutchman seems to call for the reader's own interpretation purposefully... the criticism around it is enough to spark a debate, but still the critical aspects are not overwhelmed by the immediacy of emotion and action.

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