

By THEODORE ROSENGARTEN

LIKE ITS TAPROOT THE BLUES, JAZZ has traditionally taken its themes from the here and now. When it was chiefly music to march, drink and dance to, jazz had no reason to look back. That began to change when jazz made its appearance in concert halls, a shift that coincided with the acknowledgement that black people have a past worthy of serious study. Still, jazz composers shied away from the painful theme of slavery.

Until now, that is. Wynton Marsalis, trumpeter, band leader and artistic director of Jazz at Lincoln Center, has written a bold work for 14 players and 3 singers, set in this once-forbidden territory. A tragedy on the brink of farce, "Blood on the Fields," which will be performed at Lincoln Center tomorrow night as part of a 24-city American and European tour, is both a windfall for the jazz repertory and a refreshing contribution to the current cultural dialogue about race.

"Blood on the Fields" follows a man and a

**In a masterwork,
'Blood on the Fields,'
Wynton Marsalis tries
to acknowledge race
while transcending it.**

woman from their home in Africa to slavery in America. Jesse (Miles Griffith) is a prince who once owned slaves and now finds himself enslaved, a development so strange it seems to him a violation of nature. Leona (Cassandra Wilson) is a lower-class woman who would not have dared speak to the regal Jesse had not their new circumstances leveled all distinctions between them. Rebelling as much against his loss of status as against the cruel labor of the cotton fields, Jesse runs away. But he is caught and brought back, much to Leona's delight. From her patient love and from the wisdom of the elder Juba (Jon Hendricks), Jesse learns that past achievements count for nothing and that freedom lies in participating in the struggles of others.

Mr. Marsalis concedes that as a black artist he draws on his own experience but insists that the theme of his work is universal. He points out that he never identifies his characters as Africans. Nor does he ever use the term white man, or black.

"It's about people who are attempting to address a tragic circumstance with elegance," Mr. Marsalis said. "I am not projecting anything social onto that. I'm speaking purely as a man."

To Mr. Marsalis, the essential tool for survival is man's capacity to learn. The basic

Continued on Page 40

Theodore Rosengarten, who writes about race relations and the history of the South, is the author of "All God's Dangers: The Life of Nate Shaw" and "Tombee: Portrait of a Cotton Planter."



Wynton Marsalis in his Manhattan apartment—His oratorio "Blood on the Fields" is about people "attempting to address a tragic circumstance with elegance."

Fred R. Conrad/The New York Times