



In a soap opera scene, Sherry Wyatt knows the situation, but Ed Manney doesn't. Through the questions she asks, he figures out the situation and plays along.

# TURNING ON TO BLACK THEATER

FEW STUDENTS get excited about a 3:40 p.m. class. But, then, this is no ordinary class.

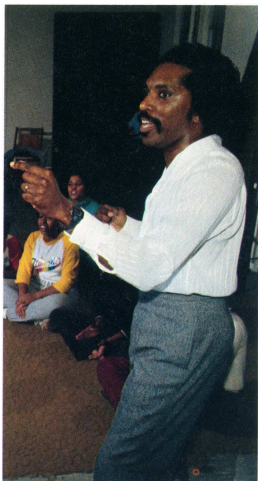
"The time flies by so fast," says freshman Taryn Corbett of her two-hour Black Theatre Workshop, in which 20 students get turned on to theater through visiting professor Clyde Ruffin. The 29-year-old is an assistant professor of performing arts and black studies at Washington University in St. Louis.

The workshop, a two-semester course that will culminate in a University Theatre production of "Rituals" this spring, is one of seven Black Studies courses currently offered at Mizzou. Black Studies Coordinator Carolyn Dorsey hopes such courses will help retain black students. "If you're involved, you feel more a part of the Campus," she says.

The Black Theatre Workshop's future, like the fate of many other programs on Campus, hangs on a thin thread of financial support. Ruffin's salary is provided through the provost's office. In 1980, a total of \$1,566 in unrestricted Development Fund gift money was set aside to initiate a black theater group.

Each Thursday, the Black Theatre Workshop begins with breathing exercises. "Let's bring all our focus into this place," Ruffin's soothing voice suggests. "Forget the frustrations of the day. Don't worry about supper or the test you have next week," he says.

Then, it's into "mind your body"



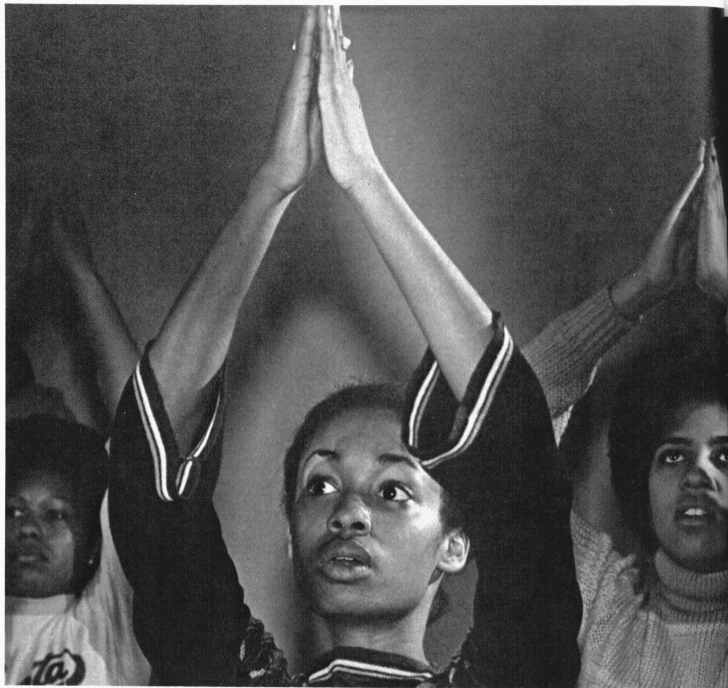
**Clyde Ruffin encourages his students to take their unique daily experiences and "recreate them artistically as the truth."**

warm-ups, all movements that define the body within space. In theater, control of your body is paramount because "your body is your instrument," Ruffin says.

The students soon realize theater takes a high degree of training. The techniques and principles are the same as in any theater course; the slant is that Ruffin is making them relevant on an ethnic and cultural scale.

One class exercise, a favorite with the students, is storytelling. Ruffin sets the stage by introducing characters and the situation, then the students, one-by-one, thicken the plot. Ruffin says this exercise not only reawakens the creative impulses that students had as children, but it also develops the imagination and helps them think on their feet.

**DURING VOICE** exercises, students learn to control pitch and volume. One exercise makes comparisons, through vowel sounds, between standard Amer-



Gina Wood (left), Mary Harris and Allsa McDonald learn how to "mind their bodies" by concentrating on a simultaneous voice and movement exercise.



ican English and the black dialect (e.g., royal vs. rawl).

"Many young black people trained in theater are trained to speak standard English in classical literature," Ruffin says, "yet they're cast in roles specifically written to be played by a black person. If you're black, you certainly ought to be able to portray a black character."

Harriet King, a sophomore theater major from St. Louis, has become more interested in writing through the workshop. "We should take what our grandmothers told us and use that to write plays," she says.

The sharing of experiences could be even more meaningful if the class were integrated. While open to all University students, the workshop has only black enrollees. "The more different types of people you can have," says psychology major Corbett, "the more you expand your knowledge."

Beyond acting, there are benefits to the class. "It's making us realize we have the ability to do anything we want if we pay attention to ourselves," says Kim Simmons, a speech and drama education major. Ruffin "makes us listen to each other, to work as a unit," she adds. Formerly an introvert, Corbett says, "You can't be shy in that class."

Ruffin, who has been successful at breaking down his students' inhibitions, plays a starring role with his students. "I've always been proud of being black," says Steve Gamage, a sophomore theater major from St. Louis. Because of Ruffin, "I feel prouder." Unlike some of his students, though, who are bound and determined to make it on Broadway, Ruffin decided, after graduating with a BA and MFA from the University of Iowa in Iowa City, to use his talent to benefit others. Consequently, he helps his church do its Christmas play and sacrifices a day out of every week for the 250-mile-round-trip trek to Columbia to teach. With one semester down and one to go, Ruffin realizes, "There's no amount of money that could account for that personal sacrifice."

**WINTER SEMESTER**, the class will devote to preparing for "Rituals," an epic poem (written by Ruffin's former student, Nkene Mawusi) that he has adapted for the stage. He promises it will be an "eye opener for black people as well as whites." Through songs, dialog, rhythmic speaking

and straight narration, the students will dramatize the rituals surrounding death and dying, religion, childhood and first love, eating and partying.

King says the class looks at the production as "a chance to show our ability to act." According to Dorsey, that's something — especially in major roles — black students don't get much of an opportunity to do, citing that one of the problems is numbers. (Of 249 undergraduate speech and dramatic arts majors, 11 are black compared to 24,774 Mizzou students of whom 892 are black.)

**THERE ARE SOME** black students, says Dr. Weldon Durham, associate professor of speech and dramatic art and director of theater, who are "not ready to get into University Theatre productions without the benefit of this more closed experience. Insofar as they want it [the Black Theatre Workshop], I think there's a need for it."

Beyond the competition for available roles that any student confronts in open auditions, another circumstance that excludes people from theater is available plays. There are relatively few roles written exclusively for blacks. "There aren't many Othellos," Durham says. "It's conceivable to me," though "to have a MacBeth of any color."

Concerning the lack of available roles for black students, Ruffin thinks the attitude of the theater department simply reflects the general attitude of people within the entertainment industry. People in the theater department, like many others, are not willing to take the artistic risk to cast blacks in roles not specified by race. They think it complicates the play unnecessarily and that the audience will not be able to accept it as believable. Ruffin disagrees: "I think it takes the audience five minutes to adjust. Then they get into the play."

Noting that one can only learn so much in the classroom, Ruffin says a permanent Black Theatre Workshop would "guarantee students who want to perform ample opportunity to do so as well as give them a chance at the bigger roles. It creates a sort of equality for everyone without forcing anyone to do something they don't want to do," he says. At the same time, it "broadens the University's outreach into the community and automatically creates more variety in the season's offerings."—Karen Worley