

Founding the James Baldwin Collective

Samuel Legitimus

In the autumn of 1991, I was 26 and graduated from the first batch of the Ecole Jérôme Savary at the Théâtre National de Chaillot in Paris—a French equivalent of the famous New York “Fame” School—which, in two years, trained you in all facets of the artistic profession (acting, singing, dancing...).

Alas, as Baldwin so aptly wrote, as soon as I was ready to fulfill my calling as an actor, I ran up against the low ceiling of opportunities available to Black artists in my country. As was the case for many Black professionals before me—including the elder of the Black actors, my own grandmother, actress Darling Legitimus (before she won the Golden Lion for her leading part as the grandma M’man Tine in *Sugar Cane Alley* at the Venice Film Festival in 1983).

During the few castings, they were surprised to see me among the candidates: “we hadn’t specified that we were looking for a BLACK actor!” Or they judged me not Black enough for the part. Or maybe I was asked to do a ridiculous and improbable primitive Black accent. No one was interested in my talent!

So I decided to escape these constant, humiliating assaults and seize my future into my own hands. I felt the urgency to work seriously on my roots, to go in search of my own song and to promote the vitality of Black culture on French soil, inspired by the tenacity of the pioneer family from which I come, and especially

the impressive careers of actors like Sidney Poitier, Harry Belafonte, Ossie Davis, Ruby Dee, or Cicely Tyson in the USA.

During a sabbatical year, I embarked on a frantic search for Black authors from all horizons likely to nourish and enrich my future artistic approach. Among them, Jimmy Baldwin's work immediately appealed to me because it spoke to my dilemma at the time: how do you function as a Black artist—or simply as a human being—in a society that has no place for you?

More than that, even then it was absolutely necessary for me and other young Black artists on this continent that uses you but ignores your needs and doesn't give you enough role models.

Jimmy Baldwin's honest thinking was like a compass for the young Black artist in his desperate search for himself and for meaning in the world around him, and he couldn't ignore that. His work was a significant and liberating discovery in my life. It was that of an artistic kindred spirit who had come a long way before me and who told me by his own example that I was not crazy to pursue my lifelong passion. I had the strange feeling that I had found an ally and a guide.

Suddenly, I wanted Jimmy Baldwin's work to be a source of inspiration and freedom for *every* generation of artists for decades to come. I threw myself wholeheartedly into all of his books—at least the few that were available in French translation at the time. Because I discovered something incredible: five years after his death, very few of his works were still available in French bookshops. Worse still, and this was the most worrying thing: Although he had lived in France for several decades and had been awarded the Legion of Honor by President François Mitterrand, no one seemed to know the name James Baldwin anymore. And why? I first had to find an answer to this question.

My first witnesses were Michel Fabre, director of the Center for Afro-American Studies at the Université de la Sorbonne Nouvelle, and his wife Geneviève Fabre, a specialist in African-American theater. As luck would have it, they lived just a stone's throw away from me, in the 14th *arrondissement*.

They speculated that Baldwin might suffer the fate of many writers who go through a period of purgatory after their death before their work is finally re-evaluated—even if it sometimes takes years! “But we don't have the luxury of waiting!” I replied with youthful composure. “This man has put his life and his creative power at the service of future generations. It is our duty to preserve his memory.”

As chance would have it, Michel Fabre organized an outstanding colloquium that year [1991]: “Encounter on the Seine: Black Meets Brown,” a meeting between African and African-American writers in Paris. He introduced me to several of them. After a few months, I decided to create a collective that would bring together artists and thinkers from all walks of life, in order to restore and pass on Jimmy's work and thinking. Direct contact with his close friends and family is also essential to this endeavor of creating a concept that respects the ideas and projects of this century's witness.

I have had the good fortune to meet and talk to many of Baldwin's friends and admirers who have become supporters of the collective: the writers Maya Angelou, Toni Morrison, Dany Laferrière, and Russell Banks, the Turkish actor Engin

Cezzar, and the French humorist Guy Bedos, the jazz musicians David Linx, Archie Shepp, and Max Roach, the poets Amiri Baraka and Ted Joans, the film directors Melvin Van Peebles, Karen Thorsen, Dick Fontaine, and Costa-Gavras, the philosopher Cornel West, and many, many more.

Thanks to the kindness of David Baldwin, Jimmy's younger brother, I was one of the last guests at the famous house in St. Paul de Vence. For five incredible summer days (and nights!) in 1995 he and I talked, laughed, and cried as if we had known each other for years. Thirty years have passed since then. Time flies by!

Since 2017, thanks in part to the phenomenal success of Raoul Peck's documentary *I Am Not Your Negro*, James Baldwin has made an amazing comeback in bookstores around the world, and his influence seems greater than ever. The James Baldwin Collective is now in full swing, with regular actions, exhibitions, and conferences. It has offshoots in Belgium, Germany, Canada, and Brazil.

My older sister Mathilda Legitimus-Schleicher is an educator and coach. She has lived in Germany since 1980, has represented the collective for several decades and is planning actions with several pan-African and international associations in German-speaking countries from 2024. Her years at Atlantic College (UK) had a profound impact on her: it was an inclusive education that offered equal opportunities for young people from all social classes and backgrounds. This is exactly what James Baldwin wanted: True education should not be limited to academic knowledge, but should also foster critical thinking, empathy, and intercultural understanding.

Like me, Mathilda is convinced that Jimmy was right: We need to address the deep-rooted prejudices and stereotypes that lead to systematic discrimination against certain races and ethnicities. Gender equality and the acceptance and equality of all sexual orientations are necessary to realize human rights and are practiced in some countries. As we have seen time and again, especially since Covid-19, racism is one of the biggest threats to a just society.

Don't give up!, Raoul Peck advised me in 2017.

When I went through difficult times in the past, all I had to think about was the promise I had made to David Baldwin and also to Jimmy's close friends over the years. Some of these valuable supporters of the *Collectif* have since passed away without witnessing Jimmy's rebirth. But I like to imagine them smiling and rejoicing that their dear friend is finally getting the universal recognition he deserves.

Don't worry, Raoul. I am far from giving up. We are planning some big events for 2024: the opening of the James Baldwin Multimedia Library in the 19th *arrondissement* of Paris.

The *Collectif James Baldwin* is always looking for strong, visionary sponsors like us who also want to put James Baldwin on the pedestal he deserves! Welcome to the *Collectif*! We will be restaging the play *The Amen Corner*, which I staged in Paris in 2007.

For me, Jimmy's most original, genuine specialty was this sensitive voice, that of a tormented soul, aiming to expand our understanding of the world. James Baldwin should be read and re-read. We all need to study Baldwin, just as we study

the founding texts, the sacred texts, because he presents us with a moral choice. We should read it again and again because liberation is never complete—one liberation always requires another.

In short, James Baldwin's critiques and recommendations were imbued with a deep understanding of the complexity of people and societies. His legacy reminds us that we must continue to fight for equality, justice, and understanding between all people. Thirty years after his death, Baldwin remains *the* great witness and classic writer on race and identity, unsurpassed and more indispensable than ever as we consider what is happening in the world today!

Jimmy Baldwin is my Black Shakespeare—and the guide for generations to come!

Contributor's Biography

Samuel Legitimus is an actor, stage director, translator, journalist, and activist. In 1993, he founded the *Collectif James Baldwin*, which brings together artists and intellectuals from all backgrounds and whose mission is to highlight the humanist writer's reflections on racism, sexism, homophobia, and prejudice through numerous actions (conferences, debates, lectures, screenings, exhibitions, etc.). Thanks to him and others, we may one day have a theater in France dedicated to black cultures. Thanks to him and others, thousands of young Afro-descendants can now seize the opportunity to become proud of their heritage.