

Black Acting Methods

Critical approaches

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Chapter 7

Remembering, rewriting, and re-imagining

Afrocentric approaches to directing new work for the theatre

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On new work and artistic leadership

In the theatre profession, it is the artistic director's responsibility to serve as a visionary. The director's role is to implement the vision and to shape the aesthetics of the play. An artistic director who aims to produce at least one world premiere play per season once shared with me that, in order to produce a new play, he must (a) really care about the play and (b) highly respect the playwright. The notion of caring about the play and respecting the playwright is vital for companies who seek to engage in diversity initiatives while creating new work. In line with our conversation about Black acting methods, it is detrimental to the play process if the artistic director does not care as much about stories that aim to uplift and attract Black communities, or if the artistic director's idea of diversity means artists and audiences of color have to assimilate.

Hence, the purpose of this essay is to offer constructive steps towards re-imagining theatre by way of new play development that relies on the traditions and histories of African Americans. The strategies outlined in this essay can help a theatre director become attuned to the artistic energies of Afrocentric artists. When discussing community cohesion, Professor Ted Cante views it as a trust factor:

Indeed, from the outset, community cohesion attempted to develop a positive vision for diverse societies, in which people from all backgrounds would feel that they belonged and were valued, enjoyed similar life opportunities and interacted with people from different backgrounds to break down myths and stereotypes and to build trust.¹

Theatre that is racially inclusive can certainly aid in breaking down stereotypes. However, it is not enough to place an African American in a play that was written with all White people in mind and expect to accomplish trust-building. Cultural diversity is not fully accomplished when people of color are used to sell messages about what it means to be American. While interculturalism is noteworthy, it is not enough to bring a person of color

into a story so that the character has to navigate or negotiate his or her place in a White world.² While there is Black presence, Whiteness is still being staged.

As audience members, we should seek personal empowerment in the theatre by holding artistic directors accountable to their mission statements. Real diversity involves people of color and Whites interacting without resistance, and without attempting to make sense of their respective worlds without regard to others' perspectives. The theatre can be productive in showing how one culture influences another if audiences demand that leaders not only be bold and empathetic, but also racially conscious. An artistic director/leader must not be a person who only makes executive decisions. Such a leader should also be a spiritual guide, affirming a people, not denying them. I will never forget having a new play of mine developed by a theatre company when the artistic director fired one of the actors because she was not as "skilled" as the others in the ensemble. I was stunned by the decision and, for the first time, felt disoriented concerning theatre—an art form in which the human spirit is truly of the essence. While natural talent is good and convenient, I argue that mere talent cannot be the sole factor in determining an actor's worth. Rather, worth should be measured by the performer's overall contribution to the experience. Every artist of color comes to the table with different backgrounds, experiences, training, and resources. Therefore, it is important to find an artistic director who can connect with the spirit of each unique and complicated individual involved and serve in a capacity where sound executive decisions are being made about the piece. He or she should have a willingness to affirm and nurture all involved, while considering how the experience will touch, transform, heal, and awaken. With this model of transformative leadership, the goal of the production is not always to yield high-quality productions. Instead, the director aims for a rites of passage in which our souls and minds are on the same wavelength.

Remembering: Afrocentric cognition

The play director may feel strongly about helping the playwright to arrive at a strong final draft of the play. Understand, however, this is not the ultimate reason you (the director) are being brought into an Afrocentric circle. When you are called upon to direct theatre of the African diaspora, you either get "it" or you understand that knowledge is power and, therefore, have potential to get "it." The "it" I am referring to is the art and science of being Black. As someone responsible for the birth of this new work, you, the director, are also responsible for the transference of cultural values, traditions, codes, and memories of Black people onto the stage.

Dr. Barbara Ann Teer, founder of the National Black Theatre in Harlem, was a pioneer in that she believed actors were not actors, but liberators. As

the director of an Afrocentric piece, referring to performers as liberators is certainly appropriate. A liberator's memory and what he or she is able to bring on stage is interrelated and is often what makes the process of acting and "becoming" such an exhilarating experience. For centuries, actors have utilized memory to recall certain emotions associated with a specific human behavior to achieve verisimilitude. When dealing with memory in Afrocentric theatre, it is first and foremost about liberation—helping the Black performer become free from systematic processes to concentrate on Blackness and the collective identity.

Brooke Kiener recalls the convening of fifty students and community members in a black box theatre in the winter of 2004 at Whitworth University Theatre for a Social Justice Institute. They were invited to speak about instances of socioeconomic discrimination they had witnessed or experienced, and she recalls the following:

I was impressed right away by the level of engagement in the group; it seemed obvious that people needed to tell these stories, to hear and be heard. But as the night went on, I also became peripherally aware of a widening gap. As the community members became more activated, empowered by the act of speaking their truth, a resistance started to surface among some of the students who, as you might expect, tended to come from more privileged backgrounds.³

Kiener reminds us of the vulnerabilities associated with memory and shared experiences. The swapping of experiences when developing a new play is a surefire way to get people to open up about their beliefs and practices while engaged in memory. The challenge occurs when there is resistance or dismissiveness during the swapping of experiences due to lack of knowledge. I am reminded of a quote by Henry Louis Gates, "Blacks—in particular, black men—swap their experiences of police encounters like war stories, and there are few who don't have more than one story to tell." If such a topic comes up in a new play development circle in which there are White males involved, there may be some resistance because White males are not typically held in suspicion. Because resistance threatens our progress as Black artists, Kiener challenges us to contemplate our roles as theatre collaborators. Through collaboration, our goal is to center the perspectives of the Afrocentric/Black contributors, and to stifle resistance by evoking awareness and sensitivity. If there is a lack of knowledge and awareness, a director must be able to redirect the resistance and lay a framework in which culture is the context and the paradigm that holds Afrocentric "ideals, beliefs, stories, texts, myths and narratives in place."⁴

Resistance can also surface when vernacular challenges Eurocentrism. I remember being the only Black writer encircled around a table in a graduate playwriting class trying to explain why the phrase "making groceries" made

sense. “You don’t ‘make groceries,’” my White male mentor said. “You go shopping for groceries.” Because the characters in my plays are directly inspired by my kinfolks and my life in the South, it is very appropriate that lines like “making groceries” are spoken by my characters. To me, these sayings are not only authentic, but eloquent—borrowed from the voices of my ancestors; yet, according to the majority, if “making groceries” were a goal my female character needed to accomplish before eleven o’clock in the morning (the hour that her favorite daytime soap, *The Young and the Restless*, came on), then my character was considered to be using the English language improperly. However, according to “White normative structure,”⁵ “I need to go get groceries” is the proper line of dialogue. Now, let me add that the phrase “making groceries” has been spoken by every member of my family and probably every female grocery shopper in southwest Mississippi. I have tender memories of going to the Sunflower store in the town of McComb to help my grandmother “make groceries.” My husband, who frequented the White-owned Vaccarella market with his grandmother in the same town, remembers pushing a buggy filled with enough food to last an entire month, to a register where his grandmother had a tab. The reputation of this African American woman granted her a credit line that would last until the store’s closing. When the store shut down, she was personally called and told she could come and get whatever she wanted because of how much she was loved and appreciated by the store owners. My husband’s memory takes him to the store aisles where he was pulled to the side by his grandmother in silent acquiescence to White customers passing by. Ultimately, I wasn’t just sharing with my fellow playwrights unique phrasing among Black folks or southerners; I was divulging a history about personage, prominence, race relations, and customs—not just a way of talking, but a way of life. The notion of “making groceries,” deeply embedded in my memory, held profound historical and personal significance. It is astounding how the mind stores information.

Directors and playwrights exist in-community together; therefore, they should value each other’s unique experiences. Likewise, directors must trust the power of where the playwrights’ memories can take a story. While the art of remembering is an individualized process, it tends to move toward the communal Afrocentric work, allowing everyone involved to develop a consensus with their sentiment or ideology. Reminiscing aside, there is the reality of crafting and understanding the parts of a play. Afrocentric cognition should be the default of the overall experience. When engaged in this form of recollection, the playwright should also be engaged in meditation as a means to foster ancestral or spiritual intuition, which links the playwright to an absent-other or another time period. When appropriate, direct the playwright to write nothing and to meditate in a private space. When his or her brain muscles have flexed, giving way to something that has cultural, social, political, or artistic significance, have the playwright write down everything that strikes a chord. Allow the playwright to speak aloud his or her thoughts,

or the accounts of actual or imaginary persons, places, or things. Remember that an expressive playwright is not arrogant, she is liberated; encourage your playwrights to give voice to memory. The impact of remembering can be powerfully integrated into a play, strictly as a form of ritual that may or may not be connected to a personal account. As an example, in Javon Johnson's play *Bones*, memory is an agent that illuminates injustice. The following dialogue takes place between a WHITE MAN and a Black man named JAKE, who have known each other for a long time:

WHITE MAN: I remember what they did to your daughter.

(Jake stops chopping and looks to the White Man).

WHITE MAN: Everybody remembers.

JAKE: What you want from me?

WHITE MAN: A piece of tranquility, I suppose.

After JAKE refuses several times to recall such an emotional memory. He finally surrenders:

JAKE: *(Lowers the ax)* They killed my baby. Thirteenth birthday and they took her from me. They left me one shoe. Just one. Little white shoes I got her to celebrate her life and they took that away from me and left me one. Wasn't white no more. Just red ... torn with my baby's blood on it.⁶

We see both Afrocentric cognition and memory at work in this moment from Javon Johnson's play. He uses the recollected past of both male characters to exist simultaneously in the same place.⁷ Inevitably, the moment, the sharing of memory, reclaims legitimacy of the deceased.⁸

What happens in the mental workspace can anchor a play or a character in ritual, giving it purpose, a sense of being, a reason to fight, a reason to believe, a reason to lose hope, regain hope and lose it all over again. Kinship, goodness, and pain reside in the mental workspace. When unsure of the story's direction, memory re-routes the writer. The practice of commemorating memories can happen as foundational work. Perhaps when the ensemble is gathered to do work on the play, ask members of the group to share memories associated with the play's greatest issue or theme. I have heard the most authentic retorts emerge from collective memory-sharing. In this stage of development, the playwright can begin to modulate the story through Afrocentric cosmologies.

Rewriting and non-writing

Before the play is wrought, it is important for the author to understand why the story must be told in the first place. This is similar to finding the dramatic question; however, the Afrocentric dramatic question requires "a deeper level of

investment”⁹ in that what is really being asked is “*what will it take for us to get free?*”¹⁰ Ebony Noelle Golden is the founding CEO and principal strategist at Betty’s Daughter Arts Collaborative, LLC. Her stance on art is “to infuse her values into the creative process.” This must happen in order for her to reach audiences in the communities she is “accountable to.” Because she believes devising ritual is just as essential as developing new work, Eurocentric trends get in her way when building a play’s foundation and can be equally challenging for any director who is being accountable to the work of an Afrocentric playwright. Here, I am specifically concerned with whether or not it is “Afrocentrically” vital to fully abandon all trends, devices, and literary tropes that seem Eurocentric, or whether it is fitting to employ what is necessary, be it Afrocentric or Eurocentric, to realize the story. Next, Golden mentions accountability. By forfeiting the Eurocentric trends, she, in turn, becomes fully anchored in Blackness. If this is the level of freedom we should achieve in Afrocentric new play development, how bound are we to plot and structure, objectives and needs? Should we even pause to establish protagonist and antagonist? Furthermore, what is character? While we are programmed to identify the protagonist of a play, for example, I believe in Afrocentric development that the first person to be identified in the piece is the *griot* or *griotte*. A leader among the other storytellers in the play, this individual is the one who connects one member to another. Identify the *griot* or *griotte*, and you have a sense of community, an ancestral connection and a “theatricalization” of history. The *griot* or *griotte* in actuality becomes more necessary than a main character. Therefore, focus on the stories, sayings, songs, proverbs, and other cultural products of the *griotte*. Explore the play’s peak emotional moment as a manifestation of one or more significant historical events preserved or shared by this *griot*. August Wilson practiced this in his work. *The Piano Lesson* is a prime example. The play’s *griot*, Doaker, in act one, scene two, explains why Berniece will not sell the family’s heirloom. He commences to explain the history of the carvings on the piano, therein, the history of the family:

DOAKER: Then he put on the side here all kinds of things. See that? That’s when him and Mama Berniece got married. They call it jumping the broom. That’s how you got married in them days. Then he got here when my daddy was born . . . and here he got Mama Esther’s funeral . . . and down here he got Mr. Nolander taking Mama Berniece and my daddy away down to his place in Georgia. He got all kinds of things what happened with our family.

We see a “theatricalization” of this in act two, scene five, when Berniece plays the piano for the first time in years. She calls on the names of her ancestors:

BERNIECE: I want you to help me. Mama Berniece. I want you to help me. Mama Esther. I want you to help me Papa Boy Charles.

By channeling the help of her ancestors, she is able to cast out unwanted spirits that had been lurking inside of her home.

If there is no sign of a *griot* or *griotte*, invite the playwright to function as the guardian of his or her own people's history. Encourage the playwright to be a *griot* among the others in the room. Guide his or her histories so that they become realities of characters. Directors traditionally place emphasis on character development when working on a new play tinged in realism. When the experience is Afrocentric, it is just as important to focus on the history and development of a people, not just a single character. It is proven that good script analysis translates into idea conception, design, and acting work. While there are many ways to analyze a play, our questions for Black play script analyses should also be culturally specific. Consider the following questionnaire for the Afrocentric performing artist:

Afrocentric analysis

Character's name(s) (African, enslaved and/or new name/identity)—calls attention to a distorted historical legacy, such as Oya in Tarell McCraney's *In the Red and Brown Water*.

Character's African tribe and customs—celebrates the root of what sustains a people, as seen in Julie Okoh's *Edewede (The Dawn of a New Day)*.

Most valued treasure/artifact—gives context to pre-existing objects or images, such as the piano in August Wilson's *The Piano Lesson*.

Traditions, values, and religious beliefs/conversions—establishes strong kinship bonds or spiritual practices while keeping ritual alive, such as the juba ritual in August Wilson's *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* or the oral tradition as seen in Gus Edwards's *Two Old Black Guys Just Sitting Around Talking*.

Anthems—connects generations and their plights through song, as seen in Regina Taylor's *Crowns*.

Greatest threat to the people—also the greatest threat to the core values, which may accentuate a state of oppression as well as an opportunity. For example, the issue of gentrification explored in Keith Josef Adkins's *The Last Saint on Sugar Hill* and the subject matter of AIDS in Danai Gurira and Nikkole Salter's *In the Continuum*.

Hero worship—may be a war hero, man or woman of courage, civil rights activist, community, political or religious leader, or someone impactful who ultimately gives the character hope, such as Nina Simone in Keith Antar Mason's *For Black Boys Who Have Considered Homicide When the Streets Were Too Much*.

Antiheroes—explores those who are a threat to justice or misrepresent it, as seen in Kia Corthron’s *Cage Rhythm* or Lynn Nottage’s *Ruined*.

Environmental bonds—the connection to physical and social surroundings, emphasizing conditions and patterns of suppression, as seen in Katori Hall’s *Hurt Village*.

Adversity tactics—involves characters emancipating themselves from a state of affairs, as seen in Idris Goodwin’s *How We Got On* or Ben Caldwell’s *Birth of a Blues*.

Along with this analysis should be a list of words, poetic phrases, and images that inspire them to live as a member of this story. Unlike other character analysis models that are need-based and sensory driven, the purpose of the Afrocentric analysis is to get the artists actively working to see the play as a sacred event in that it gives them spiritual and kinship ties, sheds a light on both the history and destiny of a people and emphasizes the need for justice. When the play does not provide the answer, the Afrocentric artist will come up with the missing analytical element on his or her own, becoming a unique carrier of social memory. In essence, all participants take on a creative and explicit role.¹¹ All artists have the power to explore the origin of a community and to determine the fate of that community. In his book *The Ritual Process*, Victor Turner writes about ideological *communitas*, which describes the external effects and inward experience of a group by examining the optimal social conditions under which they might be expected to flourish or multiply.¹²

Before the play advances far in development and becomes significantly different from its original version, it is also important that the playwright steps away from the process as a work-session and be allowed to fellowship with other artists invested in the work. Involve the designers whom we have not addressed as much. Their participation is vital, as their artistic work can capture the vastness of Afrocentricity as a holistic and complex entity or state of mind. In Afrocentric rewriting, there should be a point of non-writing to allow the playwright to become absorbed in Afrocentric spaces where bonding and sensory awareness occurs. Communing at a dinner table, attending a poetry slam, going to church, and walking through an urban community are a few examples of such spaces.

According to Jualynne E. Dodson and Cheryl Townsend Gilkes, table fellowship and meals provide context for storytelling while evoking laughter, solace, and providing a temporary release from emotional experiences.¹³ Issues of concern for Black people are exposed in this space via “a communication style that is rich in allusion, metaphor, and imagery”¹⁴—a style that is “prolific in the use of body gestures and nonverbal nuances.”¹⁵ When people who love oral tradition are encircled around a table of food, values, histories, and

situations, valuable information can be transmitted. Comfort food triggers socializing and eases the act of conversing. Table talk might include narratives containing dramatic and comedic situations and include characters with whom everyone is familiar. A playwright can infuse her script with moments from this space.

A poetry slam is another way a playwright can engage with culture and explore the language and situations of a community. Have the playwright focus on the power of words, pauses/beats, and when and why people are compelled to snap their fingers in response to the message. How is music integrated? How is repetition utilized? What compels members of the community to engage in poetry? What type of poetic lines trigger moments of call and response? The landing of a poetic line can be associated with the lines and moments in a play where there is a consensus among audience members. The poet's desire for personal presentation, verbal artistry and commentary on life's circumstances¹⁶ can also serve as monologue or soliloquy inspiration. Have the playwright consider the ways in which metaphor, alliteration, rhythm, and wordplay inspired Langston Hughes as both a poet and a playwright.

Movement/dance, musicality, and vocality can all be extracted from religious experiences as well. Lundeana Thomas explains this religious experience in her book *Barbara Ann Teer and the National Black Theatre: Transformational Forces in Harlem*. The chapter, "Black Cultural Resources: Pentecostal" explains:

The climax of the Pentecostal church service is usually the minister's sermon, which is both emotional and dramatic. During the sermon, a Pentecostal minister might strike the pulpit or even jump on top of it. Nor does he remain in the pulpit or rostrum area, but he might take a microphone and go down into the congregation. He might also establish a rhythm, keeping the beat by tapping his foot or clapping his hands. His sermon is in many ways an enactment of his biblical text. Such rhythmic preaching descends from its roots in Africa, in rhythms used by the griot or storyteller.¹⁷

Thomas goes on to say this type of experience is what Dr. Barbara Ann Teer instilled in her students. The connection between spirituality and food; spirituality and poetry; spirituality and music—all manifested in the church experience, all anchored in Africa. The social and communal importance of the Black church—testifying, singing, humming, and praying—can inspire an atmosphere, a controlling power, or the supernatural, and the soulful responses of a people. Let's consider the play *The Mountaintop*. Playwright Katori Hall explains call and response in the stage directions: "[Camae] stands on top of one of the beds. King looks on in awe. She steadies herself. Throughout her speech, King is the congregation, egging her on with well-timed sayings like, 'Well!' 'Preach!' Or 'Make it plain!'"¹⁸ In this moment, a bed becomes a pulpit, a maid becomes a minister, a man becomes a body of

spontaneous, spiritual believers and a room becomes a sanctuary. Everyone becomes one, inviting the audience to join the ritual.

Finally, an urban community is the space in which an Afrocentric playwright can become even more race-conscious because they retain cultural codes and atmospheric tones that can inform story and character. Taking time to participate in the life of these communities can be integral when writing from the lens of urban worldviews.

By engaging in non-writing and simply participating in cultural bonding activities, artists developing new work, director included, can establish a centeredness or collective identity. This centeredness and oneness is the Afrocentric vision that sets the Afrocentric new play development process apart from the American one that is embraced at conferences across our nation. On the other hand, what if the attempts to absorb African American culture are not embraced? For example, some were not comfortable in the neighborhood you visited, some were not fully engaged at church, you weren't moved by the poetry and your dinner experience was subpar. Be reminded that, in ritual, criticism is prohibited. If the critic inside the creator is not quiet, the opportunity to fully engage will be missed. The creators must stay centered on the shared experience. Focusing on bad feelings, rough opinions, and negative dispositions will lead to apprehension. It is this apprehension that tends to force theatre practitioners to create theatre in the normative, which is a threat to multiculturalism.

At this juncture, the playwright, having absorbed many Afrocentric experiences, returns to her script, infusing it with Neo-Africanisms, spiritual happenings and structural rebellion, placing emphasis on the poetic; actors or storytellers reactivate their analytical acumen, embracing the physical and psychological traits of a people; designers reinforce central images and areas with Afrocentric motifs, symbols, and emblems, strengthening their visual statements; then the director's performance style becomes rich with visual compositions and punctuated moments. Everyone's work becomes inspired by Afrocentric absorption. Creative impulses are in sync. "By regaining our own platforms, standing in our own cultural spaces, and believing that our way of viewing the universe is just as valid as any, we will achieve the kind of transformation"¹⁹ Afrocentric theatre needs to withstand the test of time.

Re-imagining: a spiritual default

Developing a play should feel both reactive and proactive. Reactive in that there is some historical response, and proactive in that there is self-questioning. The result should lead to a re-fashioning of society or the self, which is a sacred event. To be devoted at this level is essentially what it means to devise ritual. If the new work you are developing or devising is realism, have the creators explore a version of the play in which time and space are abolished. Allow the playwright to think on how the story would

function in symbolic time or if time and space were abolished during a peak moment in the play. Consider the two plays mentioned previously, *Bones* and *The Mountaintop*. *Bones* is set “somewhere in the woods” and the time is left to our “discretion.” In *The Mountaintop*, culminating stage directions read: “Camae begins to float away into another world. Another dimension. Her voice becoming an echo as the future continues to consume the stage.”²⁰ While the core of your interpretation may already be established, involving yourself in the process as a member of the ensemble will shape your thinking about every other aspect of the production and possibly inspire you to rethink or re-imagine your interpretation. Actors will develop a deeper understanding of who they are and the playwright herself will begin to understand what the play is really about. Design and technical aspects of the production will be integrated in alignment with the Afrocentric ideal. Everyone’s creative impulses will be informed by culture, values, and the spiritual. This calls for a re-imagining of what collaborative means. Creative collaboration, as we know, is vital to theatre. Afrocentric collaboration does many things that “traditional collaboration” does not, one major aspect being that it not only invites the spiritual, but makes spirituality a necessity. The director exercises the faith-muscle more than the brain-muscle. Designers focus on the play as an evocative experience more so than what they can create with technical resources and instruments.

Many times, as a playwright, I have prayed privately over my work and my impulses, asking an absent-other to guide me so that I know what needs to happen next, what needs to be said next, or to what place the characters should be led. Divine intervention is what I find myself seeking. Divine intervention is what all artists should seek at all times.

Collective creativity doesn’t thrive on establishing the same mood and style to achieve cohesion. Rather, cohesiveness matters most during cultural absorption and fellowship. Assuming the likeness of Ebony Noelle Golden, collaborating or ensemble-building is a means of “getting people comfortable with sharing a story with one another.”²¹ Much like the dramatic question requires a deeper level of investment, so does the collaborative. “How are people in a creative space able to get closer to what it takes for us to be free?”²² Raising consciousness through creative work and process impacts everyone involved, from the creators, to the performers, to the audience. The growth and development of a people and a play can hearken back to the artistic leader and the director of the play. And so, do we need a hybrid method for developing new work? Must we have a blend of Eurocentric theatrical conventions when we set out to accomplish an Afrocentric agenda? My response is no. Plays that are “modeled upon Eurocentric dramatic structure”²³ are not Afrocentric. These plays may deal with the Black experience, but they are not Afrocentric. For my thesis, I wrote the most Afrocentric play I could ever write. The earlier drafts of this play explored the life of an African American woman named Joanna, who was pursuing a Ph.D. at a

predominately White university. She was married to a White man. Her best friend was White. Essentially, Joanna's worldview was grounded in Whiteness. Ironically, she dreamed of Africa. There was a character in the play, Jira, who represented true Blackness and was Joanna's alter ego. Joanna and Jira would journey together to African villages, building communities and birthing movements. There were nineteen drafts of this play. With each draft, the play became more and more universal. It became more and more American and the Jira character went away. No one in the play development process could help me sustain Jira and what she represented, because no one, other than me, could comprehend her. This is an example of how African American playwrights can become under-served, and Afrocentric visions are eradicated when processes are not re-imagined.

Conclusion

If we consider the acceptance speeches of Tony Award recipients Anika Noni Rose, Audra McDonald, Phylicia Rashad, and James Monroe Iglehart, we will see a pattern that speaks to the spiritual sensibilities of most, if not all, African American theatre artists. Anika Noni Rose tells us the meaning of her middle name, Noni, which means "gift from God."²⁴ Audra McDonald thanks "all the shoulders of the strong and brave and courageous women" she stands on, giving honor to Lena Horne, Maya Angelou, Diahann Carroll, Ruby Dee, and Billie Holiday.²⁵ Phylicia Rashad talks about being born into a family of courageous people who helped her to realize her full potential as a human being.²⁶ James Monroe Iglehart literally does a praise break on stage.²⁷ There is no denying that when it comes to our contributions to the theatre, our work is a commemoration of our African American histories and struggles. For some Black artists, Afrocentricity is innate and, by way of ritual, we honor and broadcast it. The "catch-22" is that most writers, directors, and performers of Black plays enjoy the security of (White) American theatre training, companies, and success measurements. While these great benefits may give way to diversity initiatives within the American theatre canon, it often contradicts what it means to be a true Afrocentric artist.

Notes

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- 2 Ric Knowles, *Theatre and Interculturalism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 1.
- 3 Brooke Kiener, "The Wisdom of Us: Reconsidering Identities and Affinities Through Theatre for Social Justice," in *Staging Social Justice: Collaborating to Create Activist Theatre*, eds. Norma Bowles and Daniel-Raymond Nadon (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2013), 235.
- 4 Lundeana Marie Thomas, *Barbara Ann Teer and the National Black Theatre: Transformational Forces in Harlem* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1997), 161.

- 5 Ebony Noelle Golden (activist) in discussion with the author, February 2015.
- 6 Javon Johnson, "Bones," *Black Drama: Second Edition* (Chicago: Alexander Street Press [online]).
- 7 Alessandro Portelli, "History-Telling and Time: An Example from Kentucky," in *History and Memory in African-American Culture*, eds. Genevieve Fabre and Robert O'Meally (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 171.
- 8 Andree-Anne Kekeh, "Sherley Anne Williams Dessa Rose: History and the Disruptive Power of Memory," in *History and Memory in African-American Culture*, eds. Genevieve Fabre and Robert O'Meally (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 224.
- 9 Ebony Noelle Golden (activist) in discussion with the author, February 2015.
- 10 Ibid.
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- 12 Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (New York: Aldine Transaction, 1997), 132.
- 13 Jualyne E. Dodson and Cheryl Townsend Gilkes, "There's Nothing like Church Food: Food and the U.S. Afro-Christian Tradition: Re-Membering Community and Feeding the Embodied S/spirit(s)," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 63, no. 3 (1995): 519–538.
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- 15 Hamlet, "Word," 27–31.
- 16 Ibid.
- 17 Thomas, *Barbara Ann Teer*, 110.
- 18 Katori Hall, *The Mountaintop* (York: Methuen Drama, 2011), 17.
- 19 Molefi Kete Asante, "Dancing Between Circles and Lines," in *The Afrocentric Idea* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1998).
- 20 Hall, *The Mountaintop*, 39.
- 21 Ebony Noelle Golden. Clinnesha D. Sibley. Phone interview. Arkansas and New York. February 27, 2015.
- 22 Ibid.
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