

A Reflection on Directing the Plays of Adrienne Kennedy

While an undergraduate at Harvard in the late 1980's, I first encountered the plays of Adrienne Kennedy in Bob Scanlan's *American Drama Since 1945* course. I was immediately drawn to Kennedy's *Funnyhouse of a Negro* for its surreal, oneiric imagery and powerful -- even painful -- exploration of race and identity. I was haunted by the play's vivid depiction of a fractured consciousness and the terrible toll of endemic racism on the central character, Sarah. Scanlan's essay "Surrealism as Mimesis: A Director's Guide to *Funnyhouse of A Negro*" remains one of the most valuable works of exegesis on this complex dramatic work, and studying the play with him in depth fanned the flames of my fascination. I vowed that someday I would stage Adrienne Kennedy's vision.

When it was announced that Adrienne Kennedy would be coming to Harvard the following year to teach playwriting, I was overwhelmed with anticipation. Having heard that she would only accept the first twelve students to walk through the door, I showed up two hours early for the first day of classes. I was second in line. Studying the art of playwriting with Adrienne was one of the most profound and formative experiences of my creative life. Adrienne inspires by example, and under her tutelage, the students in the class were encouraged to mine our dreams -- the imagery, emotions, memories, fears, and desires of our subconscious minds -- for material to inspire deeply personal drama. Adrienne's course opened up a whole world of possibility for me, and with her encouragement, I dared to broach a new frontier of artistic expression that married language, imagery, action, and emotion in new and exhilaratingly unexpected ways.

Adrienne and I forged an unusual bond. During the course of her tenure, she lived in the same house as I -- Adams -- and we began a tentative connection outside the classroom. I was in profound awe of her, and she was equally perplexed by me: a restless, mercurial young artist with multiple piercings, a bizarrely shaved head, and a profound and palpable sense that I did not fit in anywhere. Still, we were drawn to one another. When I directed plays on campus, Adrienne made an effort to attend. Indeed, when in my senior year I ultimately directed *The Anniversary*, the play I had written in her course, she returned to campus from New York to see the production. Her faith in me, support of my work, and patience during my own difficult creative maturation left a life-long mark on me.

Adrienne and I stayed in touch, loosely, after I graduated. I went on to study Directing at the American Repertory Theatre's Institute for

Advanced Theatre Training at Harvard. We reconnected on campus when the A.R.T. staged *Ohio State Murders* under the direction of Marcus Stern. For years, I hoped to find an opportunity to direct one of Adrienne's plays. Sadly, many theatres and even educational institutions are loath to tackle her work, fearing (quite unreasonably, I think) that it is too provocative, experimental, or challenging to be accessible to audiences or commercially viable.

Much to my surprise and delight, when I was invited to be a guest director for the Graduate Acting Program at Brandeis University in 2010, the Department responded favorably to my suggestion that I direct *Funnyhouse of a Negro*. At last my dream would come true! Working on that production -- collaborating with an astoundingly talented, brave, and visionary team of actors and designers -- is one of the proudest accomplishments of my artistic life. We were able to delve deeply and carefully into the text, examining the language and imagery and emotions. We worked in bold physical ways to bring it to life on stage with authenticity, integrity, and originality. To be sure, it was not easy. Kennedy's play invites one into a terrifying psychic landscape, and insists we confront harrowing events and experiences. Adrienne was incredibly supportive as we worked, speaking with me, and with the actor playing Sarah, by phone to offer guidance and insight. I am deeply indebted to all the artists -- and to our audiences -- who were so generous with me and with one another in that intense process and production.

My interest in Kennedy's plays has continued in other areas of my professional life: as a college professor, I teach *Funnyhouse* in my Script Analysis course at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, inviting students to work hard to grasp and interpret the text from multiple perspectives. In that course, we cast a particular eye as to how the multiple expressive languages of the stage -- scenery, costumes, sound, and lighting -- might be used in production to embody and evoke Kennedy's themes.

When I was approached by Harvard's Department of Theatre, Dance, and Media to return to campus to direct this fall's mainstage production, I was deeply honored and extremely invigorated. I seized the opportunity -- twenty-five years after graduating! -- to continue my relationship with the plays of Adrienne Kennedy at Harvard. I proposed to Martin Puchner a production of *The Owl Answers*, a piece which, in many ways, exists as the other half of a dramatic diptych formed with *Funnyhouse*. The two plays inform, expand, and echo each other, as both explore a central female character whose fractured identity and morphing consciousness wrestle with issues of race, family lineage, and culture; indeed, with life and death. I am excited to begin this work with

the current students of Harvard, supported by the TDM Department and a team of outstanding designers and staff. Adrienne is thrilled with this venture, and I am in regular contact with her as we develop ideas and prepare for what promises to be a challenging but rewarding process.

The Owl Answers is a challenging text to decode. Like much of Kennedy's work, the "story" is not what is directly dramatized. Instead, the play allows for fragments of information to coalesce as a collage of imagery, language, action, and sensation, portraying a mental state and emotional experience. But one can assemble a fundamental understanding of the major elements of the story. The play's protagonist is Clara. "SHE" -- as she is known in the *dramatis personae* -- is CLARA PASSMORE who is the VIRGIN MARY who is the BASTARD who is the OWL. Before the first lines of the play are even spoken, we confront the truth that Clara -- like the others that populate her world -- has a divided and multi-faceted consciousness and representation. In strict "realistic" storytelling terms, Clara is the illegitimate daughter of a rich white man named William Matheson and the black cook of his household in the American South. As a child, rejected by both of her birth parents, Clara is adopted by a black couple: Reverend Passmore and his wife, whose strict rearing suffocates and terrifies Clara. The death of her biological father triggers a quest -- perhaps real, perhaps a nightmarish fantasy -- in which Clara travels to London to claim her father's body, and with it the historical and literary heritage that she associates with her father's lineage, and to which she feels a deep internal connection. The New York City Subway car that serves as one of the play's central loci morphs unsettlingly into the Tower of London, and Clara finds herself isolated and imprisoned, surrounded by unfeeling guards who are strangely recognizable historical figures: Shakespeare and Chaucer and William the Conqueror.

Kennedy's play is a powerful testament to Black experience in America: both of when it was written in the early 1960's, and for today. Clara's mixed race -- half white and half black -- is both a reality of identity for her character and a fundamental state of cultural division (and potential unity) that Kennedy explores on multiple levels in her work. The painful psychic split that Clara experiences -- an inability to reconcile the warring factions of her history and her present -- is a pointed and searing reminder of the unsettled issues of race in our country.

As a director, I see it as my responsibility to create the circumstances in which each member of the ensemble can do his or her very best work. It is my mission to empower the collaborating artists to bring to the process their full, authentic selves. I strive to give actors the freedom to make their own decisions, draw their own conclusions, express their own humanity. I believe that plays are made precisely at the

intersection of the poetry of the text and the full identity of the artists involved. As a white male director, I can bring to this process my artistic experience, an intellectual rigor, and a profound personal fascination with *The Owl Answers*' vivid dramatic world and groundbreaking experimental style. But I cannot bring to the process an innate understanding of the femininity and blackness that are central to Adrienne Kennedy's voice. Indeed, I offer this opportunity to *let the play speak*, and I relish the opportunity to listen attentively to what it has to say. That collective enterprise -- to unearth, decipher, and share the play's myriad potential "meanings" -- can only be undertaken by a group of committed actors who are willing to be honest and fearless. The process of *The Owl Answers* will invite a diverse cast of black and white actors (the play's cast composition is, itself, half black and half white!) to speak their experience and truth. It is from those specific voices -- and most especially the black women -- that I hope to ultimately learn what this play has to teach. Additionally, I am thrilled to be joined and aided in the process by Aislinn Brophy '17, the former president of the Harvard Radcliffe Dramatic Club, who will serve as my Assistant Director. And we are deeply honored to have Adrienne Kennedy's grandson, Jacob Kennedy, in the rehearsal process as an observer and participant!

I recently returned from an exhilarating trip to England: an opportunity to follow in Clara's footsteps in the London landscape. I trod the floorboards of the house in which Shakespeare was born and looked upon the very dining table where the Brontë Sisters filled their pages with imaginative ink. I ran my fingers over the same stone walls that imprisoned Anne Boleyn and saw the patch of earth that drank the blood when the axe fell upon her neck. I tried to imagine Clara's awe, fascination, and terror as she found herself there, shackled to and yet cruelly divorced from her heritage. My travels also included the fascinating Churchill War Rooms, the underground bunker from which Britain's great Prime Minister conducted England's Second World War campaign. It was there I came across the following quotation from Churchill: "Courage is what it takes to stand up and speak; courage is also what it takes to sit down and listen." I hope that I will have the bravery to do both in appropriate measure during this creative endeavor.

Adrienne Kennedy's plays are intensely personal and even (indirectly) autobiographical, and they insist that those who enter their worlds be willing to expose their own individual hopes, dreams, fears, and values with bravery and honesty. The specificity of Kennedy's vision and voice as a black woman is central to understanding *The Owl Answers*, and this production will be an opportunity for a genuine cross-section of the Harvard student body -- artists of all genders, races, cultures, and perspectives -- to explore and ultimately share its message. This will

require trust, faith, and mutual respect. This will demand discussion, listening, patience, and care. In our process, we will be reading Kennedy's experimental autobiography *People Who Led to My Plays*, a collection of fragmentary memories and personal inspirations; my hope is to generate additional context by thinking about the rich and varied well of sources from which a play of this complexity springs. I anticipate that this production will provide many powerful occasions for students and faculty, artists and audiences, to reflect, respond, and connect; indeed, we have already begun to organize round-table discussions, artist talk-backs, dramaturgical exhibits, and symposia to support the work.

All plays take place in the present. That is, literally, they are apprehended by the human senses *in performance* only in the immediate moment. Regardless of the year in which a play is written, regardless of the time period in which the play may be set, a performance unfolds within the ephemeral mystery of the eternal present. To that end, we must embrace that this production of Adrienne Kennedy's *The Owl Answers* at Harvard University in 2017 will be staged in a specific political climate and amidst a difficult national conversation. The recent tragedy in Charlottesville, Virginia and the President's reprehensible response are stark reminders of just how high the stakes are, and how profoundly necessary art is during moments of crisis.

Theatre exists -- as it has for thousands of years -- as a vehicle for understanding where we come from, the world we live in, and where we are headed. Theatre is how we decipher and express the human condition. Indeed, we tell *each other's* stories specifically in order to better know our selves, and to learn about those who are different from us. We come together in shared space and time -- in that immediacy of the present moment -- with the common goal of communication and connection. This leads to understanding. Art uses the *specific* to point us toward the *universal*. Kennedy's characters, words, and images will serve as a lens through which to view the unique complexity of a Black woman's experience in America -- and thereby deepen our collective humanity.

I look forward with great anticipation and gratitude for the opportunity to explore and share Adrienne Kennedy's astonishing play *The Owl Answers* with the Harvard community. Let us all commit to a process and a production of this powerful play that will be an opportunity for dialogue, reflection, action, and connection.

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