Interview by CHRISTOPHER NIQUET

ADRIENNE KENNEDY'S

Silent Theatrical Revolution

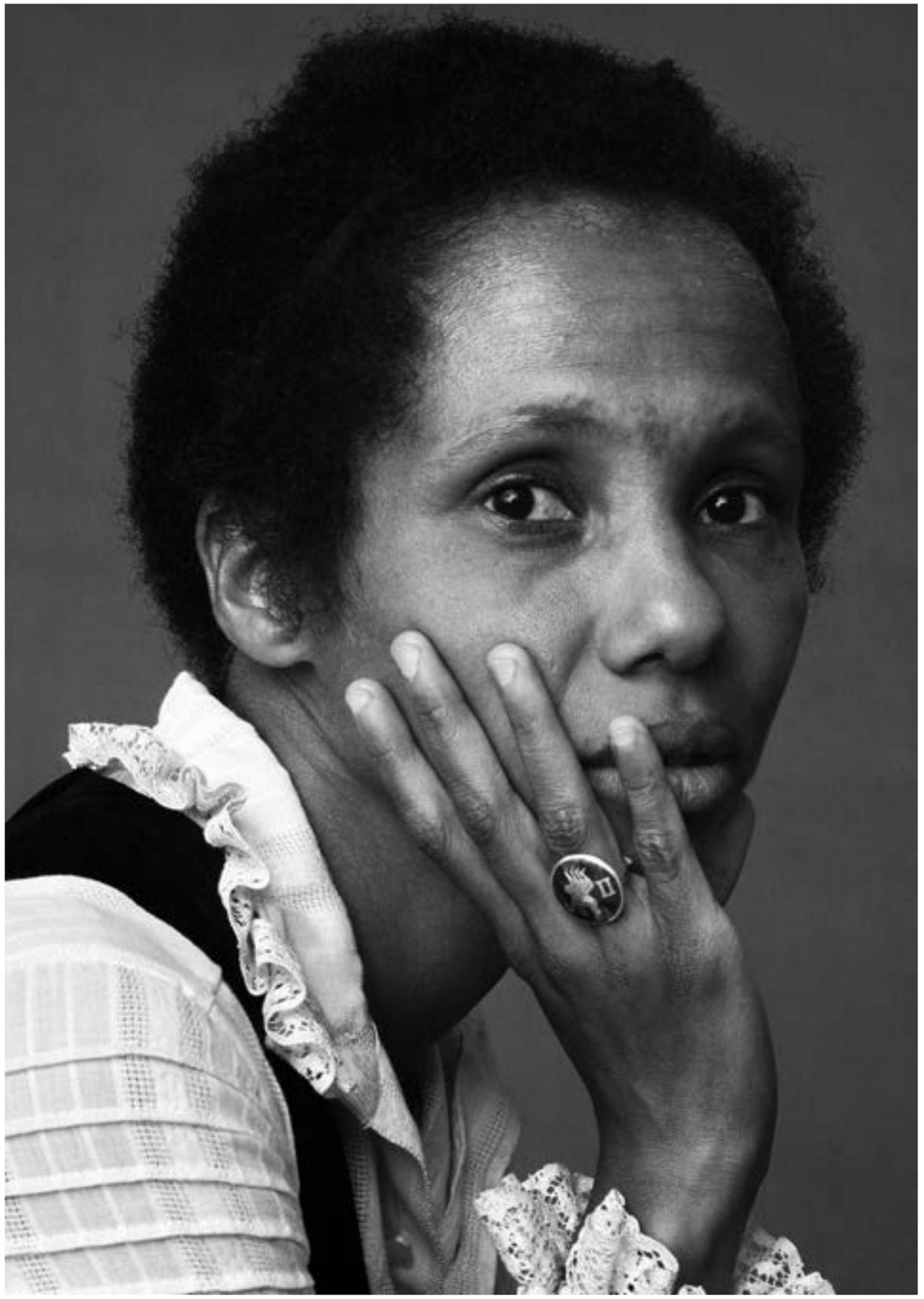
Lula shines a light on the people, books, and memories that have led to the pioneering yet little-known writer's work

Adrienne Kennedy is a writer of unprecedented depth. Her seminal work, *Funnyhouse of a Negro*, written in 1964, created a revolution. A revolution built on silence as much as words, allowing the stage to become a place of experimentation like never before. That she is not more widely known remains a mystery.

Funnyhouse of a Negro won the Obie Award for Distinguished Play, and showed Kennedy to be a leading figure in American literary tradition. The one-act play focuses on Sarah, portraying her internal struggle with her racial identity, with the images of Patrice Lumumba, Queen Victoria, and Christ serving as ciphers into different aspects of her self. It is this profound relationship between womanhood, race and the psyche, that so distinguishes Kennedy's work.

Born in Cleveland in 1931, she grew up on Hollywood movies, before moving to New York and then later Africa with her then-husband Joe Kennedy. Steeped in literary tradition – from Greek tragedy to English classics – and informed by the places she has lived, Kennedy's writing offers a formidable richness and clarity of voice. Indeed, in 1995, the critic Michael Feingold wrote, "With Beckett gone, Adrienne Kennedy is probably the boldest artist now writing for the theatre."

She has written several plays including the Royal Court-commissioned monologue, *Sun: A Play for Malcolm X Inspired by His Murder* (1968) and is the author of the memoir, *People Who Led to My Plays* (1987). In 2003, Kennedy was awarded the Anisfield-Wolf Lifetime Achievement Award, and in 2008 she won the Obie Lifetime Achievement Award. In a time when identity politics and divisive rhetoric dominate the mainstream media, threatening the support systems by which we live and pushing people further apart, Kennedy's work is ever more urgent. Here she talks to Christopher Niquet about the breadth of her influences and the danger of prescribed labels.



Adrienne Kennedy by Jack Robinson, *1970*
Credit: Getty Images

Christopher Niquet: You grew up in Ohio, the home state of Dorothy Dandridge, Lillian Gish, Dean Martin, Clark Gable, and Doris Day. To my European ears, there is a particular purity and clarity to the English spoken in Ohio. Were you influenced by what you heard as a child, as much as by what you read?

Adrienne Kennedy: Language was always important, in all its forms. Firstly, both my parents were from Georgia and had Southern accents. It was the prime goal of the schools they went to that the Negro students speak perfect English. And it was supremely important to them, in turn, that their children speak perfect English. Often the dinner table was a place where you were corrected.

I grew up in a neighbourhood in Cleveland called Mount Pleasant, which was home to a plethora of nationalities and identities: Greek families, Polish families, Italian families, and Jewish families fleeing Poland. There wasn't much respect for the Ohio accent. The teachers at my elementary school, like my parents, were fixated with the idea that all the children should speak what they perceived to be good English. Good English was how people spoke in the movies, or in books, or in the newspapers. My parents and their friends were people with Southern accents determined to speak like people on the radio.

When I went to Ohio State, I distinctly heard the flat Ohio accent you describe. 99 per cent of the students were from small towns; I connect that accent with white, small towns. I found it jarring. I knew it wasn't what my parents and teachers had tried to instil in us.

CN: Did you inherit your mother's love of movies in the same way you inherited the speech she'd learned from them?

AK: I was named after a movie star, Adrienne Ames. As far back as I can remember, my mother went to the movies once a week. When I was five or six, she began to take me with her. In the movie theatre she was different: she would cry and laugh, she was not the stern person she usually was at home. She always asked my opinion about the story and the characters, and the clothes. She seemed to really connect with these people. By the time I was eight, the kids in the neighbourhood all went to the movies every Saturday, a consistent group of us: Italian, Greek, and Negro. This Saturday adventure was a source of supreme pleasure, and in the summer we would re-enact scenes from the movies. I often asked her why we couldn't live in Hollywood. It seemed natural that we should go there. Or to the places in the movies: Paris, London, New York.

In my mind, I often became these people from the movies – and that continued. To this day I feel the transformative effects of *Now, Voyager*; *Mrs. Miniver*; *The Letter*. Even now, when I watch *Gaslight*, I have the freedom to be Ingrid Bergman, live in London and Italy, be the heroine of a murder mystery – and no one can take that from me.

CN: Which books inspired you as a young girl?

AK: The Cleveland public schools taught mainly European literature. We read Shelley, Keats, Wordsworth, the Brownings. Our teachers repeated over and over that these writers captured the essence of life. In high school, they taught Edgar Allan Poe and Nathaniel Hawthorne. I remember, I read all the books in the elementary school library and won an award to go to a state reading contest. Dickens was emphasised throughout: *A Christmas Carol*, when I was a child and in junior high, *A Tale of Two Cities*, *David Copperfield*, and *Oliver Twist*. When we read *Hamlet* in my senior year of high school, it was introduced as a huge event.

At home I learnt about black culture. My father read me Langston Hughes and Paul Laurence Dunbar. I was always talking to my mother, and her life at boarding school was what I was most captivated by. I knew no one else who had gone to boarding school. As I wrote in *People Who Led to My Plays*, it wasn't until I read *Jane Eyre* that I encountered a story that seemed akin to my mother's stories. Like Jane, she had a dead mother, was sent away, became a teacher.

I saw a connection between real life and literature – no book has ever connected me to the world as much as *Jane Eyre*. I wasn't just this thin, plain little girl who lived in Cleveland, who was also a Negro (my parents always talked of how white people didn't like us and my father, a social worker, gave long speeches on race). I was connected to the wild moors of England. I fastened myself to those stories as a means to transport myself into another life.

"All I know is you keep writing and writing. Succeeding sometimes. Failing. And writing more."

Kennedy with her mother, Etta Hawkins, and her son at Heathrow Airport

CN: When did you realise that you could create your own stories?

AK: I remember in fifth grade we read Laura Ingalls Wilder. Our teacher was very enamoured with Wilder, and talked constantly about how she was American, not English, and just wrote about her life. I remember thinking, "I can do that. I want to be like Laura Ingalls Wilder." I loved *Little House in the Big Woods* and used to imagine that our house was in the big woods, not on a street in Mount Pleasant. I started to write tiny fragments, two or three lines, starting at about age 12, based on the conversations my parents had. At that time, in school, we were reading very simple plays published by Samuel French: little books, similar to my autograph books.

Then, in high school, four of us, on a double date, went to see *The Glass Menagerie* by Tennessee Williams. Seeing that play in the round, sitting a few feet from the actors, is still possibly the greatest theatre experience I've ever had. Over the summer I kept thinking, "I could do that." I started my own "Glass Menagerie" in my notebook, incorporating more of my family's dialogue. I had no idea my mother was reading it until she ordered me to stop writing down what was being said in our house. I obeyed her. I was about 16, and I forgot all about it.

Two years later, a freshman at Ohio State – a boy that everyone said was a little crazy – took me to see *Death of a Salesman* by Arthur Miller on tour in Downtown Columbus. That reignited my awareness that you could write about your life and your family. Away from home, in the dorm at Ohio State, I started again writing brief paragraphs. This method of writing is still the basis of my work.

Plays were also a big influence on me. I was obsessed with Tennessee Williams, *A Streetcar Named Desire* in particular. I remember seeing him once on the Broadway subway – he was just two feet away from me but I was frozen speechless. I think I didn't really want to

Adrienne and Joseph Kennedy with their son on Easter Sunday

Adrienne Kennedy and her son arriving in Europe for the first time

"I was always perturbed, angry, full of hatred, feeling hated, feeling that white America was constantly trying to deprive me of my birth right."

The playwright at her wedding to Joseph Kennedy, *1953*

meet him – he was too mythic. It wasn't until January 1955, when myself, my husband Joe Kennedy, and our baby came to live in New York that I concluded I could write my own play. I wrote *The Pale Blue Flowers* in 1956.

CN: Did you always know you'd become a writer?

AK: I was expected, like all friends, tobecome an elementary school teacher. And I think for a long time I subscribed to that ostensibly inevitable fate.

CN: How did you find your own writing voice?

AK: All I know is you keep writing and writing. Succeeding sometimes. Failing. And writing more. Always trying to say what you have in your mind. Failing. A lot.

There's no doubt that seeing, at age 29, London, Paris, Casablanca, Liberia, Accra, Ghana, Rome, Florence, dramatically focused my writing.

I had been toying with stories about my cousin Sidney for years, but not until I saw the Palace of Versailles did he come into full focus, and I wrote the short story "Because of the King of France" in 1960, inspired by Marcel Camus' film, *Black Orpheus*. I knew that in the story he would run away, as he did in real life, but I didn't know where I wanted him to run to until I saw Versailles. I call that finding a voice.

CN: In your work, you weave the personal into the universal. When did you realise that you could make a bigger story out of your own obsessions?

AK: What happened was Lorca. Somewhere around 1957, when Joe and I were still living in Columbia, I read the poetry collection, *Poet in New York* by Federico García Lorca. Much of it centres around Columbia, Harlem, Morningside Heights. I studied the book, trying to see why my own lines on Morningside Heights were so flat. I also studied *The Seagull* by Anton Chekhov. I had not been in a war, had not had an exotic life, was not in the air force or the army, was not a great entertainer. It became crystal clear that my stories, centring on my family, were all I had.

I knew that very often my pages, my plots, my landscapes, were flat. It was clear I needed a metaphor for race. I was always perturbed, angry, full of hatred, feeling hated, feeling that white America was constantly trying to deprive me of my birth right. I was seeking metaphors, symbols. I could see that, in *Death of a Salesman*, the cellar and the boys' past were tools. I needed tools: I needed deaths, suicides. These thoughts took place over years.

A sustaining power was and always is Hamlet. I studied how Shakespeare used Hamlet's father. I was always reading Ibsen, Flaubert, Dostoevsky, Turgenev, Virginia Woolf. From films I learned how to set characters in a vivid place, with gigantic problems: *Juarez*, *Shadow of A Doubt*, *Rebecca*, *How Green Was My Valley*. The characters have concerns of power, love, struggle, conflicts, hatreds. Families were in conflict over religion, love, history. Reading biographies was crucial: Van Gogh, Picasso, the Curies, Kwame Nkrumah, Frida Kahlo, James Baldwin, the Brontës. I yearned to meet historical people, and used to imagine that I knew them, or knew the characters in stories. All of this, over a long, long period, was teaching me how to bring my family stories to a level that was worthy of reading.

I had tried for years to write about my mother and her half-sister. I found myself studying Blanche and Stella in *Streetcar*, studying the themes of poverty, class,

"I had not been in a war, had not had an exotic life, was not in the air force or the army, was not a great entertainer. It became crystal clear that my stories, centring on my family, were all I had."

Adrienne, Joseph and their son attend a bullfight in Spain

morality, love, loyalty, loss, devotion, time. I tried to imitate the fusion of elements.

I can't pinpoint a time when I thought consciously about any of this. There is no big realisation. You just keep struggling in the dark.

CN: The thing I love most about your work is its diversity. Your monologue, *Sun: A Play for Malcolm X Inspired by His Murder* (1968), is one of the most beautiful pieces of contemporary American literature I have read. Are you sometimes frustrated by being labelled a playwright?

AK: Funny you should ask that! I do not see myself as a "playwright." You may write plays sometimes, but what you are is a writer. Lorca is the kind of writer I aspired to be. Labels are so destructive. How about "black woman playwright"? Journalists seem to have endless categories.

CN: How do you feel about the millennial generation, which seems to forgo fixed identities?

AK: That is a profound question, and I cannot answer it. I only know that the people I loved from childhood were to me without these journalistic definitions. I was too naive to glue definitions to people.

One of the things I owe to my public school teachers, is that they defined all the writers, painters, musicians, by name. Enter the Negro entertainers: Dizzy, Billie, Duke. Negro, yes, but no further breakdown; they were described just by their names. It wasn't until the 1970s that I heard all these definitions, and I recoil from them.

Adrienne Kennedy with friends

I come from a political family. DuBois, Marian Anderson, Paul Robeson, Marcus Garvey, were frequently discussed. We read radical and black newspapers *The Crisis* and the *Pittsburgh Courier*. The condition of American blacks was always being analysed. But as a young person with a pen, or a Remington typewriter, I needed to cast aside imprisoning definitions. I needed to enter all stories. Richard Wright and F. Scott Fitzgerald, Albert Camus and Frantz Fanon. Duke Ellington and Judy Garland. It was my natural instinct.

In my twenties, if I had kept repeating over and over, "I am a black female writer," I would have been frightened. What did that mean?

I knew Gwendolyn Brooks was Negro, but I called her a "Pulitzer Prize writer." I knew James Baldwin was Negro, but my New York friends called him a "great essayist." If I had broken down all these people's identities in the fashion of the last 20 years, I would not have been able to forge imaginary bonds and friendships with them.

And forging imaginary bonds with everyone from Picasso to Joe Williams and Frank Sinatra is what gave me energy to see myself as a writer. And freed my mind.

A Paris production of *Funnyhouse of a Negro*

"I do not see myself as a playwright. You may write plays sometimes, but what you are is a writer. Labels are so destructive."

Kennedy with her son by Jack Robinson, *Vogue, 1970*
Credit: Getty Images