

THE THEATRE FEBRUARY 12 & 19, 2018 ISSUE

ADRIENNE KENNEDY'S STARTLING BODY OF WORK

The playwright's œuvre addresses race, dispossession, and madness.



By Hilton Als

February 5, 2018

“**B**lood” is one word that comes up. Blood as poison, blood as might. Other words—“help” and “cry”—are among the verbs most likely to be spoken by the eighty-six-year-old playwright Adrienne Kennedy’s characters. These bitter, lovesick words—sharp bleats of distress—rise and cling to the curtains and the walls in the ghastly showrooms of her characters’ troubled, hope-filled, and hopeless minds. Taken together, Kennedy’s twenty-odd plays form a long and startling fugue, composed of language that is impactful and impacted but ever-moving, ever-shifting, as her protagonists, usually women of color, stand on the precipice of disaster, madness, or loss. For the course of the performance, at least, those women overcome their passivity and their willfulness—a jarring combination—in order to tell us what life can feel like on that cliff of color and gender.



Adrienne Kennedy in Williamsburg, Virginia, in January, 2018. Photograph by Susan Worsham for The New Yorker

Kennedy's most recent work for the stage, "He Brought Her Heart Back in a Box" (evocatively directed by Evan Yionoulis, in a Theatre for a New Audience production, at the Polonsky Shakespeare Center), is smaller than her previous plays but is shaped like the shimmering and original scripts that made Kennedy's name in the nineteen-sixties and have kept her in a place of her own in the New York theatre scene ever since. As I watched the two main characters in "He Brought Her Heart Back"—a well-off young white guy named Chris (Tom Pecinka) and a light-skinned black woman named Kay (Juliana Canfield), in the segregated Georgia of the nineteen-forties—my mind drifted to Kennedy's other plays, the majority of which are suffused with memory and a child's question: Why can't life work out, be the dream it should be, like a song? Or, better yet, a movie?

Indeed, Kennedy is a kind of film scenarist who is too literary for film but whose strongest work renders the stage more cinema-like, less intransigent, more open to different ways of moving. The stage directions for her first professionally produced play, the Obie Award-winning 1964 one-act “Funnyhouse of a Negro,” read like a script for a movie that’s about to be shot. Kennedy is alive to every sound and every image that her protagonist, Negro-Sarah, feels and projects. Sarah lives in a room on the Upper West Side with her various “selves,” including Queen Victoria and the Duchess of Hapsburg. In her darkened “chamber,” she has made a romance of European and English empire and culture. Still, no matter how much she identifies with these historical figures, who are, perforce, isolated by their power, she cannot fully enter into their stories or *be* them, because she’s black—stained by her dark-skinned father. In “Funnyhouse,” history, personal and otherwise, is accompanied by sound. Now it’s the sound of knocking on a door. Who’s knocking, and why?

VICTORIA: It is my father. He is arriving again for the night. He comes through the jungle to find me. He never tires of his journey.

DUCHESS: How dare he enter the castle, he who is the darkest of them all, the darkest one? My mother looked like a white woman, hair as straight as any white woman’s. And at least I am yellow, but he is black, the blackest one of them all. I hoped he was dead. Yet he still comes through the jungle to find me.

VICTORIA: He never tires of the journey, does he, Duchess?

DUCHESS: How dare he enter the castle of Queen Victoria Regina, Monarch of England? It is because of him that my mother died. The wild black beast put his hands on her. She died.

Other “selves” show up in the play—including Jesus and Patrice Lumumba—but none can save Sarah from the feeling that her race is doomed and her life loveless. Eventually, she hangs herself, killing off that yellow body, as well as all the confused and vivid history that was tearing it apart.

The protagonist of “The Owl Answers,” a one-act from 1965, is a light-skinned (“pallid”) black woman named Clara. As Clara sits in a clanging, rumbling New York City subway train, Shakespeare, William the Conqueror, Chaucer, and Anne Boleyn enter the car. Clara wants to see her father. She is being held captive in the Tower of London. For what crime? Her blackness? Clara pleads with Anne Boleyn:

CLARA: Anne, Anne Boleyn. Anne, you know so much of love, won’t you help me? They took my father away and will not let me see him. They locked me in this tower and I can see them taking his body across to the Chapel to be buried and see his white hair hanging down. Let me into the Chapel. He is my blood father. I am almost white, am I not? Let me into St. Paul’s Chapel. Let me please go down to St. Paul’s Chapel. I am his daughter.

But Clara’s being “almost” white means nothing here; her blackness is what keeps her outside of British history. She’s a cultural orphan, split by her parents’ racial shame and recriminations. As the play ends, Clara tries to kill her black lover, a symbol of so much anguish, but she fails, and what alternative does she have except to become an owl, a raceless non-human who sees so well in the dark?

In Kennedy’s 1976 one-act “A Movie Star Has to Star in Black and White”—the title plays on the idea of the Negress as star—a black woman named Clara (Kennedy often reuses names in several works) tells her story through characters from the black-and-white movies she loved, and projected herself onto, as a child: Bette Davis in *“Now, Voyager,”* Jean Peters in *“Viva Zapata!,”* and

Shelley Winters in “A Place in the Sun.” When Clara was growing up, there were no black film actors who could express her panic, her high theatrical self-engagement, or her sense of grief. Saddened by her dark-skinned father’s abandonment and pregnant with her first child, Clara expresses her anxiety, through “Bette Davis,” in one of the greatest monologues of the twentieth century:

BETTE DAVIS: When I have the baby I wonder will I turn into a river of blood and die? My mother almost died when I was born. I've always felt sad that I couldn't have been an angel of mercy to my father and mother and saved them from their torment. I used to hope when I was a little girl that one day I would rise above them, an angel with glowing wings and cover them with peace. But I failed. When I came among them it seems to me I did not bring them peace . . . but made them more disconsolate. The crosses they bore always made me sad. The one reality I wanted never came true . . . to be their angel of mercy to unite them. I keep remembering the time my mother threatened to kill my father with the shotgun. I keep remembering my father's going away to marry a girl who talked to willow trees.

The play, an underproduced masterpiece, is a mosaic of women’s pictures, in every sense of the word—pictures that Kennedy crafts by marrying poetry to action. At the end of “A Movie Star,” as in “A Place in the Sun,” Shelley Winters drowns, a latter-day Ophelia sinking into a watery grave, while her killer, her once and always love, looks on, dispassionate.

Death, maimed spirits, racial and cultural self-hatred, the joy of the imagination, of finding real-life metaphors to describe who you are, the propulsive force of anger, nightmares, humorous imaginings—where do all these hobgoblins and fancies come from? At the start of her original and groundbreaking memoir, “People Who Led to My Plays” (1987), Kennedy herself poses that question: “More and more often as my plays are performed in colleges and taught in universities, people ask me why I write as I do. . . . Who influenced you to write in such a nonlinear way? Who are your favorite playwrights? After I attempt to answer, naming this playwright or that one, as time progresses I realize I never go back far enough to the beginning.” The memoir is an attempt to go back to the beginning. Wonderfully, Kennedy doesn’t offer a straightforward biographical self-portrait, but “People Who Led to My Plays” brings into focus all that mattered to her as a girl, as a young woman, and as an artist, from paper dolls to Joe Louis to Ginger Rogers and Fred Astaire.

Kennedy was born Adrienne Lita Hawkins in Pittsburgh, but grew up in Cleveland, Ohio, in such multiethnic neighborhoods as Mount Pleasant and Glenville. Her dark-skinned father, C. W. Hawkins, was a social worker, and her mother, Etta—who had a white father—was a schoolteacher. “It’s important to remember that I grew up in an immigrant neighborhood but was also a product of black middle-class culture,” Kennedy said in one interview. “I always tried to make sense of that. Tried to balance that. To understand where I fit into that world.” In school, she learned Latin. (Her astonishing 1968 play “A Lesson in Dead Language” takes place in a classroom, where the students’ menstrual blood stains the backs of their white dresses and the Latin teacher is a white dog.)

Kennedy loved the mornings she spent listening to her mother recount her dreams, which she sometimes believed were true, and she loved, too, the wildness of Emily Brontë’s prose and her story of unquenchable love. Kennedy and her brother, Cornell, spent summers visiting relatives in Montezuma, Georgia, their parents’ home town. (According to Kennedy, her mother was the illegitimate daughter of a powerful married white man.) The train journey to Georgia in the Jim Crow car was one that Kennedy never got over; trains figure prominently in her plays. In Montezuma, she saw “Colored” and “White” drinking fountains. Segregation was as real as her mother’s dreams. At the same time, Hitler was rolling through Europe. A lookout tower went up in

Kennedy's Ohio neighborhood. (In her play "A Rat's Mass," from 1966, two children have rat tails and worship at a Catholic altar, while shouting about Nazis as an imminent threat.)

Nazis, Lena Horne visiting Kennedy's neighbors, the superb order of her mother's house, her mother's mixed-race background: all these things spoke to Kennedy's imagination, just as Thomas Hardy's grim and theatrical novels did when she discovered his work, as a student at Ohio State University, where she enrolled in 1949. (She was blown away by "Tess of the d'Urbervilles.") It was in Columbus that she experienced racial hatred first hand; there were only a few black female students there, and Kennedy felt ostracized by her white classmates. The bitter lives of pastoral women that Hardy portrayed in his work were as significant to Kennedy as the characters in Tennessee Williams's "The Glass Menagerie." From these authors she understood that one could write what one knew about family and the desire to wrench oneself away from it, and that women could speak at the speed of their own logic, if they chose to.

Kennedy's degree in elementary education—one of the few fields open to black women, who were dissuaded from majoring in English—had little impact on her career. Shortly after her graduation, in 1953, she married a fellow-student, Joseph Kennedy. The couple eventually moved to New York, where they went to the theatre and immersed themselves in bohemian culture, while he worked on a Ph.D. in social psychology. Kennedy has said that her former husband—they were married for thirteen years—helped release her from "this image of myself as simply somebody who might teach second grade."

In 1960, Joe Kennedy received a grant from the African Research Foundation. Off the couple went to Ghana, by way of Europe and North Africa. It was Kennedy's first trip to England, Spain, Morocco—the places she had read about or seen in movies. The journey made her thoughts more fluid; fragments of her past came back to her, fragments that she wanted not to make whole but to shape. "The imagery in 'Funnyhouse of a Negro' was born by seeing those places," Kennedy noted in an essay about the play. After several months in Accra, her husband travelled on to Nigeria and Kennedy moved to Rome, where she finished writing "Funnyhouse" the week before her second son was born. "I was twenty-nine," she wrote. "And I believed if I didn't complete this play before my child's birth and before my thirtieth birthday I would never finish it."

In the same essay, Kennedy noted that in Ghana, and for the rest of the trip, she had stopped straightening her hair. (Hair is central in "Funnyhouse.") By refusing to allow her hair to be "processed," Kennedy was turning her back on how a colored girl was supposed to look, let alone be, while grappling with the question that all black American intellectuals struggle with eventually, especially when living abroad: How did the African become a Negro? As a Negro, she was many things—black and white, a bastard child of cultures that were not her own, though she was part of them, a product both of Europe's cultural schisms and of American racism. Dismantling her romanticism, in her plays she could curse England and Europe in their own language, while wondering what her yellow body would look like without them. Who would she have been without her dark-skinned father and the violations associated with his skin color? In an interview included in Paul K. Bryant-Jackson and Lois More Overbeck's "Intersecting Boundaries: The Theatre of Adrienne Kennedy" (1992), Kennedy's first director, Michael Kahn, talks about working on "Funnyhouse of a Negro":

When I first met Adrienne, instead of explaining the play to me, she brought me loads and loads of photographs and reproductions of paintings. From that I really understood what the power of the images were for her. And for some reason, even though I was a white boy from Brooklyn, I shared a lot of those understandings of the same images.

Billie Allen, the actress who played Negro-Sarah when “Funnyhouse” premiered, remembered how angry the play made both whites and blacks—particularly blacks, who felt that it denigrated the race. Allen said that the work was clearly about “the depth of the damage of institutionalized racism.” But while that ever-present wound was a pressure point in a number of more traditionally crafted, narrative dramas and comedies by such brilliant black playwrights as Lorraine Hansberry and Alice Childress, Kennedy struck a nerve by failing to offer an explanation for it: the madness of being a Negro in America was . . . mad. Why filter it? In “Funnyhouse of a Negro,” Kennedy’s characters don’t so much talk to one another—there is no real connection through her dialogue—as hold up a mirror to the forces that are pulling their minds and bodies apart, leaving all that unique, pulsating language on the stage floor.

Unlike her black male contemporaries—Douglas Turner Ward, Amiri Baraka, the powerful and underrated Ed Bullins, and others—Kennedy did not make her politics central to the drama of being that her characters wrestle with. Although she may have agreed with the Baraka-founded Black Arts Movement and its credo—black stories for black audiences—race was just one of the front lines in her characters’ battle with the self. (Her beautiful 1969 monologue “Sun: A Poem for Malcolm X Inspired by His Murder” says more about the leader’s psychological resonance than a zillion now forgotten get-whitey plays.) In a 1995 interview, Kennedy spoke about how “Funnyhouse of a Negro,” closed after fewer than fifty performances, in the wake of what she recalled as hostile or uncomprehending reviews. Still, the black and white artists who loved the play—Mike Nichols, James Earl Jones, and Jerome Robbins all went to see it; it was enthusiastically supported by Edward Albee and his Playwrights Unit—recognized something new in Kennedy’s language of heartbreak and revenge.

In a sense, Kay, in “He Brought Her Heart Back in a Box,” is Negro-Sarah’s mother. To say that the story is autobiographical is to state the obvious. But, as usual in Kennedy’s plays, the autobiographical strain is not direct. Also, “He Brought Her Heart Back,” which runs for just over forty minutes, isn’t exactly a play; it’s a lyric populated by characters who feel familiar to Kennedy’s longtime readers and audiences.

Kay is a mixed-race seventeen-year-old student at a boarding school in the lightly fictionalized town of Montefiore, Georgia. Her grandmother lives in the black part of town. Her mother committed suicide when Kay was an infant; her father writes histories and mysteries. Beautiful but prim, Kay loves Chris, whose wealthy father oversees the boarding school. Chris, who is forward-thinking, wants to escape his father’s control and become an actor in New York. But the young aspirants are burdened by a history they cannot shake. When they talk to each other, they are usually divided by space. (Kay recites her first lines from a balcony, while Chris emerges from a cellar where he does work for his father.) As in Kennedy’s other plays, conversation doesn’t necessarily involve communication or catharsis. Often, it is an excuse for recounting dreams and nightmares. Chris describes his mother’s horror of her husband’s illegitimate black children; Kay talks about her mother’s death, in Cincinnati, and about how her father brought her mother’s heart home in a box. Did she kill herself because of love? Because of the pain of segregation? The shame of having a biracial daughter she could not care for? Or was she murdered? It’s as if the characters, played by more than capable, emotionally true actors, were speaking in a confessional to a God whom only they can see.

Kay predicts that, together, she and Chris will have a life like those depicted in “Bitter Sweet,” the 1929 operetta by Noël Coward, but the piece ends tragically, and what we’re left with, primarily, is the image of Kay changing her clothes at various times during the performance, as though exchanging one skin for another as she moves toward a freedom that she will never know.

The set designer, Christopher Barreca, has done an extraordinary job of realizing Kennedy’s cinematic approach to stage pictures, and when I saw the production I was reminded of “A Movie Star Has to Star in Black and White,” in which Kennedy most

directly explores how screen images can inhabit the mind. It would have been terrific if Yionoulis had paired “He Brought Her Heart Back” with “A Movie Star.” The new work is too short and thin to thrive on its own, especially for audiences who haven’t seen Kennedy’s work before. How marvellous it would be to experience Kennedy’s new work alongside another version of her parents in love and at war, spinning together and separately as their daughter tries to be if not a divided self then entirely herself. ♦

Published in the print edition of the [February 12 & 19, 2018](#), issue, with the headline “Howl.”



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