

PEOPLE WHO LED TO MY PLAYS

Adrienne
Kennedy

Theatre Communications Group

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Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the management of several people . . .
*This book is dedicated
to my mother and father,
Hawkins, Edwⁿ and Mayde,
Etta and C. W. Hawkins,
Alice Hawkins, and my brother,
my sons, Adam and Joe,
Cornell Hawkins.*
I owe a debt to many
writers and their supporters for support and friend-
ship and wish to thank them. I'd also like to thank Robert
Gottlieb and my editor, Alice Quinn, who encouraged
me to continue with the book after seeing half of its
pages, giving me the confidence to pursue and finish it.

A.K.

ELLEN TARY SCHOOL

Acknowledgments

1941-1943

I would like to acknowledge the encouragement of several people . . . Janie and James S. Kennedy, Lynne Hawkins, Edward Albee, Gillian Walker Maysles, and Alice Hawkins . . . and the inspiration of my brother, Cornell Hawkins. I owe a tremendous debt to many writers and theatre people for their support and friendship and wish to thank them. I'd also like to thank Robert Gottlieb and my editor, Alice Quinn, who encouraged me to continue with the book after seeing half of its pages, giving me the confidence to pursue and finish it.

A.K.

ADRIENNE KENNEDY has been a force in the American theatre since the early 1960s, influencing generations of playwrights with her hauntingly fragmentary lyrical dramas. Exploring the violence that racism visits upon people's lives, her plays express poetic alienation, transcending the particulars of character and plot through ritualistic repetition and radical structural experimentation. Frequently produced, read and taught, Kennedy's works continue to hold a significant place among the most exciting dramas of the past fifty years.

Ms. Kennedy is a three-time Obie Award-winning playwright, receiving awards for *Funnyhouse of a Negro* in 1964 and *Juno and Jean in Concert* in 1996. She has received numerous honors, including the American Academy of Arts and Letters Award for Literature, The Anisfield-Wolf Book Award for Lifetime Achievement and a Guggenheim fellowship. She has been commissioned to write works for The Public Theater, Jerome Robbins, the Royal Court Theatre, the Mark Taper Forum and Juilliard. In 1995–96, the Signature Theatre Company dedicated its entire season to presenting her works.

Ms. Kennedy has been a visiting professor at Yale, Princeton, Brown, the University of California at Berkeley, and ended her teaching career with six semesters at Harvard. She resides in New York City.

A VOYAGE

1960 - 1961

*On the QUEEN MARY
Africa
Georgia remembered
Julius Caesar
And pages that held a "destiny"*

...Voyage flooded my mind.
At twenty-nine I felt defeated because I had not achieved my goal to be a published writer. I vowed that when I stood on the deck and the boats took us out into the Atlantic, I would be like the character in *New York*, when I returned from the journey I would be transformed ... how or exactly in what way transformed I didn't know. Once into the voyage, when my husband and son joined the ship I found some

esterday's the day our piano & qd's we're being followed
wif a horrid I am say does lo our oir n yest, and we're gonna
Picasso MADAME HEESE.

Onward to Africa, and up the Nile where we'll spend three days on the
train. A very uncomfortable trip, made much worse by the extreme heat and
highly off of our usual comfortable standards. But we'll have
However, the most important part of our trip will be the time we'll have to play.
"Anyplace is a good place for a game," said one of our men who
had no grand aquifer) among piano players could not seem to no good
place for a game. We're in Cairo with lots of boxes, boxes
"boxed" down from time immemorial. Bette Davis was asked what she
hoped to find when she got back to America. "I hope to find a new
radio show," she said. "I've never seen a 'boxed' radio show off." Which is
probably a few thousand more than would be found on the radio in America.

The ship QUEEN MARY, Now, VOYAGER and Bette Davis:

In the fall of 1960, my husband traveled to Africa to work. Our whole family went with him. As I stood on the deck of the *Queen Mary* a morning in September 1960 thoughts of Bette Davis and *Now, Voyager* flooded my mind. At twenty-nine I felt defeated because I had not achieved my goal to be a published writer. I vowed as I stood on the deck and tug-boats took us out into the Atlantic that, like the character in *Now, Voyager*, when I returned from the journey I would be transformed . . . how or exactly in what way transformed I didn't know. Once into the voyage, while my husband and son roamed the ship I found some



beautiful paper from the ship's writing room, paper with a marvelous drawing of the *Queen Mary* at the top of each page, and I started a new story.

It would become the very first story I published—in *Black Orpheus*, a literary magazine edited by a German editor, Ulli Bieir, out of West Africa. The main character was based on my cousin who had run away to the Virgin Islands, and in my story had run away to the Virgin Islands *and* at the same time run away to France to live in Versailles.

Being on the ocean in these charming writing rooms (perhaps being on water) seemed to join the real and the unreal in my writing in a way that I had never before envisioned. This story, a brief one, was called "Because of the King of France" and it possessed a logic which had been evading me for a decade. The main character "behaved" in a certain way as a result of an encounter with the King of France, and with Chopin. It was a dramatic turning point in my work.

By the time we reached London, which would play a huge role in a play I would write in a few months, I was already seeing my work differently.

"Sidney," the character based on my cousin, had been a character I had worked on for at least three years. I had given him fantasies; but he had never taken "direct action" as a result of these fantasies. Now I began to dimly recognize that my statue of Beethoven that I kept on my desk as well as the photograph of Queen Hatshepsut were forces that caused me to act.

I remembered the miniature busts on Miss Eichenbaum's piano. Why had I not seen how real they were to me? How they caused me to behave differently? And here I was at twenty-nine compulsively trying to make myself a twin of Bette Davis in *Now, Voyager*, a movie I had seen at the Waldorf Theatre on a Saturday afternoon during World War II. The orange tower was still up then.

On the voyage:

Away from all my old books, but now besieged and surrounded by a myriad of real, astounding new imagery (ocean, staterooms, the decks, standing at the rail), my unconscious and conscious seemed to join in a new way.

I remembered—

Picasso's MADAME HÉLÈNE:

Often when I was depressed, my hair fell out, as my mother's hair fell out when I was born because of the ether she had to take during a difficult labor. At the Museum of Modern Art I had found a postcard of Picasso's *Madame Hélène*. Her hair seemed a living thing, an image I would soon use in my play *Funnyhouse of a Negro*.

Picasso's drawings of bullfights:

They showed the need for me to continue to try to achieve truth and power in very small sections of my stories and then analyze that success on a small scale.

David Duncan's pictures of Picasso at home in France:

On seeing photographs of Picasso sitting and walking amid large canvases and eating from plates decorated with his drawings of fish, I realized imagery in my work could take up a larger space. I was a person who after I wrote carefully stacked my pages and shut them inside the desk and closed the desk. More and more I tacked up on the wall cards, prints and photographs, even carried them with me. Finally I took to Scotch-taping my typewritten pages on the wall. It began to make a difference in my work.

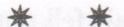
Poe:

Many times I remembered "Annabel Lee," the poem I had recited to my sophomore English class in the spring of 1947. We were judged severely on our delivery, our diction, our interpretation of lines. Many nights I sat in my room with the blue wallpaper, or walked down the maple-tree-lined streets whispering over and over:

"It was many and many a year ago,
In a Kingdom by the sea . . ."

All spring over and over, as I sat in the dining room across from my mother's china cabinets doing my homework, I repeated the lines. I wanted to be good. Perhaps it was then that I became aware of the power of

repetition of lines of poetry, a device I would eventually use a great deal in my plays.



The Tower of London and Anne Boleyn (1960):

How fascinated by her I was as the Beefeater at the Tower of London told us how Henry VIII had imprisoned her, how she had walked the tower at night and how Henry had beheaded her. Soon Anne would become an image for imprisonment in a play, a confidante whom a character would discuss love and sorrow with.

The voyage:

As the Duchess of Hapsburg had haunted my mind, so would Queen Victoria come to do the same. The statue we saw of Victoria in front of Buckingham Palace was the single most dramatic, startling statue I'd seen. Here was a woman who had dominated an age.

In my play I would soon have the heroine, Sarah, talk to a replica of this statue. Finally the dialogue with a statue would be explicit and concrete. And the *statue* would reply; the *statue* would inform my character of her *inner* thoughts. The *statue* would reveal my character's secrets to herself.

Voyage:

Our family would soon see Cherbourg, the Tower of London, Trafalgar Square, Hyde Park, Versailles, the Opéra in Paris, the Louvre, the Tuilleries, the Sacré Coeur, the Seine, Madrid, the Prado, the streets and mosques of Casablanca, and fly into a sunset over Tunisia.

West Africa: a voyage in 1960

There where I saw the Ethiopian Princesses, the palace of Tubman, and the statue of Kwame Nkrumah, it was there I started the lines of two plays, *Funnyhouse of a Negro* and *The Owl Answers*, and the lines had a new power, a fierce new cadence.

Patrice Lumumba:

When we arrived in West Africa everyone talked of Patrice Lumumba, the Congo's young and heroic Prime Minister. And in Ghana, at every store and market, there were photographs of Lumumba walking with Kwame Nkrumah. (These men represented a vision of a freed Africa.) I carried the small gilt-edged photo of Nkrumah and Lumumba in my purse. Suddenly Lumumba was murdered.

"They killed Patrice Lumumba," everyone in the streets of Accra, in the restaurants, at the campus of Legon, said. "They've killed Patrice Lumumba. Lumumba was the hope."

Just when I had discovered the place of my ancestors, just when I had discovered this African hero, he had been murdered. Ghana was in mourning. There had been a deep kinship between Nkrumah and Lumumba. A few people we met had heard Lumumba speak. Even though I had known of him so briefly, I felt I had been struck a blow. He became a character in my play . . . a man with a shattered head.

My father and Patrice Lumumba:

I remembered my father's fine stirring speeches on the Negro cause . . . and Du Bois' articles in *Crisis* which my father had quoted. . . . There was



no doubt that Lumumba, this murdered hero, was merged in my mind with my father.

Tubman (President of Liberia):
He lived in a palace in the center of Monrovia. We stood outside the gates, just as we had stood outside the gates of Buckingham Palace, and looked beyond to the courtyards and palace. It was the first time I had seen a palace, an official palace, in which a Negro lived. A Black man living in a palace catapulted my consciousness onto a new level. A Black living in a palace and the President of a country . . . the idea of it made my blood rush. I had not seen the Ethiopian Princesses.

Ethiopian Princesses:

They sat on the terrace of the Ambassador Hotel in the sun drinking tea, wearing organza dresses. They had olive skin and opal-colored eyes. They're Ethiopian royalty . . . princesses, said the British man at the next table as everyone gazed at them.

Ulli Bieir (editor of BLACK ORPHEUS):

As soon as we arrived in Ghana I heard of a literary magazine, *Black Orpheus*, published by the German editor Ulli Bieir, who lived in Nigeria. On the journey to Ghana I had finished writing "Because of the King of France" and as soon as I saw a copy of the intriguing dark purple magazine with African drawings I decided to mail Bieir a copy of my story. In less than two weeks I received a letter from him saying:

Dear Mrs. Kennedy:

I like your story very much and would like to publish it in *Black Orpheus*.

[An acceptance after more than ten years.]

I will be in Accra in a few weeks and look forward to meeting you.

What happiness I felt as I sat in the yard of the Accra house. I reread the small transparent piece of paper over and over: "I would like to publish . . ."

When Ulli Bieir came to Accra, we all had dinner at the Achimota Guest

House and he invited us to Nigeria to meet his wife, a painter, who lived there. Word seemed to travel fast in West Africa among foreigners. It was soon known that I was having a story published in *Black Orpheus*. "Are you a writer?" people now asked. "Yes," I said. "Yes." I felt such exhilaration being published in *Black Orpheus* that I worked more feverishly on the passages and pages that I had started on the *Queen Elizabeth*.

We had stayed in several cities a week (London, Paris, Madrid, Casablanca) and in each city my notebook had filled up with ideas, thoughts, feelings, impressions. Now, after Joe had gone to the bush and our son had left for school on the campus of Legon, I worked constantly until one o'clock, when I walked to the school and picked him up.

The sun and the moon seemed to have a powerful effect on my senses. I felt on fire. We bought masks, cloth, musical instruments made of gourds, drove to the north of Ghana where men ran naked, drove to a village where vultures sat atop every tree, sat in a circle and sang with an African family, had tea with Ghanaian ambassadors in the lavish dining room of the Ambassador Hotel, and drove to the white beaches where wild white horses were running free.

Writers I read in Ghana:

Chinua Achebe, Amos Tutuola, Wole Soyinka, Eufua Sutherland, Lawrence Durrell (poems, especially one called "Christ in Brazil").

I bought these books at the bookstore at the University of Legon.

Now that I was going to be published in *Black Orpheus*, I was joined to these writers and I wanted to read their work.

Africans or the masks:

A few years before, Picasso's work had inspired me to exaggerate the physical appearances of my characters, but not until I bought a great African mask from a vendor on the streets of Accra, of a woman with a bird flying through her forehead, did I totally break from realistic-looking characters. I would soon create a character with a shattered, bludgeoned head. And that was his fixed surreal appearance.

The owls and myself:

The owls in the trees outside the Achimota Guest House were close, and at night, because we slept under gigantic mosquito nets, I felt enclosed in their

sound. In the mornings I would try to find the owls in the trees but could never see them. Yet, at night in the shuttered room, under the huge white canopied nets, the owls sounded as if they were in the very center of the room.

I was pregnant again. And there were difficulties. I had to stay in bed for a week, as I bled. I listened to the owl sounds, afraid. In a few months I would create a character who would turn into an owl.

Nkrumah:

In front of the House of Parliament in Accra was a statue of Nkrumah—often in the evenings we drove out into the savannahs to look at the compound in which his house sat and on Sundays we drove to the airport and watched Nkrumah arrive from trips. There would be ceremonies at which chieftains spoke. To see a man and to see a statue of him in the same space of time broke through boundaries in my mind. Statues were of real people.

Nkrumah's face:

His face was on cloth that was popular throughout Ghana: women made and wore dresses of it and men wore shirts of it. I bought as much as I could carry and made a skirt of the blue cloth with Nkrumah's face illustrated hugely in black and white. Because it had become a kind of national cloth, I felt when I wore it that I had sealed my ancestry as West African.

Myself:

The colors of Ghana caused me to remember my summers in Georgia . . . my grandparents . . . the landscape of Georgia. It all emerged in the passages I was writing.

My husband and myself:

I had never seen my husband less than I did now that we were in Africa. He left very early before daylight and was often in the bush two or three days. And now that I was pregnant, I would not be able to travel freely with him over Ghana. The doctor advised that I travel little until the fifth month of pregnancy. All of this produced growing tensions and unhappiness in me. It was now that I felt increasingly that I was just accompanying another person as he lived out his dreams. The long hours alone in the rented Accra home, at the guest house in Achimota or Kumasi, from dawn to late at night,

filled me with fear. I was twenty-nine years old and a failure in my eyes. And although Africa had ignited a fire inside me and we looked forward to the birth of our second child, I felt (after being together for ten years) that I was acquiescent to another person's desires, dreams and hopes. The solitude under the African sun had brought out a darkness in me. I wanted to be more separate.

Jesus and my parents' marriage:

After much indecision my husband and I decided I would go to Italy and wait there until he finished his study in Nigeria. So there I was in the spring of 1961, the spring that my parents separated after thirty years of marriage. I received the letter from my mother (I'd walked down the Piazza di Spagna to American Express to get the mail) one May morning. The letter said they were separated, that my father no longer was living at home but was now in Georgia. I was not prepared for this shock. I could not envision my parents separate.

My mother had always said holding her family together was the most important thing in the world. Suddenly that spring Jesus became a character in the play I was writing, and a surprising Jesus, a punishing Jesus; berserk, evil, sinister.

I remembered how so long ago when we all took drives, when we had sat at the campfire together or listened to Jack Benny, I had seen Jesus as sweet, docile. I had believed "what a friend we have in Jesus." But that spring, sitting in the Pensione Sabrina, I went on creating a cruel Jesus Christ.

Mrs. Rosebaugh and Caesar:

Walking through the Roman Forum, I thought of Mrs. Rosebaugh and her stories of Caesar. I remembered the life of St. Augustine and how I studied the texture of his dialogue. I remembered copying the settings in Dante's *Purgatory*, I remembered that for three enchanting years I had sat in that Latin room, that pale-colored room, with the drawings of ancient Rome hung high on the wall.

And now, to see the Tiber, the Catacombs, to see the Hills of Rome, then I'd go back to the Pensione Sabrina and write.

My heroine, Sarah, would have photographs of Roman ruins in her room.

I remembered PHAEDRA and how I studied dialogue:

HIPPOLYTUS: *My mother was an Amazon . . . my wildness, which you think strange,
I suckled at her breast,*

And as I grew, why, Reason did approve what Nature planted in me.

*Then you told me the story of my father and you know how often when I listened
to your voice I kindled hearing of his noble acts.*

The length of the monologues, as well as the context, was very influential.

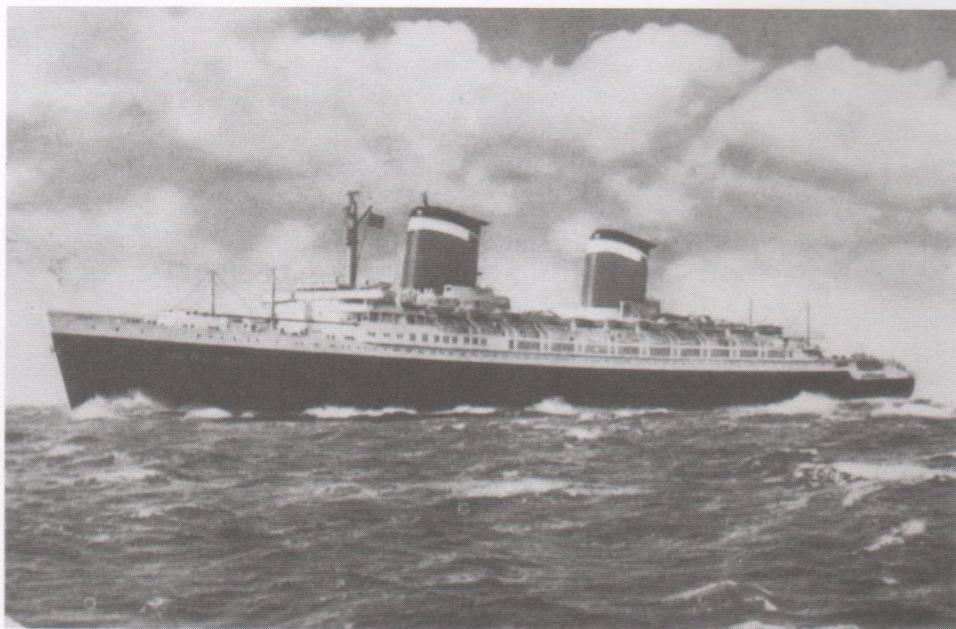
Our family:

Joe arrived from West Africa the week before the birth of our son Adam. How thrilling it was for us sitting in the garden of the Salvator Mundi Hospital with our new baby. We remained in Rome for six weeks . . . strolling on the Via Veneto . . . in the Villa Borghese . . . eating dinner in sidewalk cafés . . . our lives seemed perfect.

*Adam, our son born in Salvator
Mundi Hospital (on the Janiculum
Hill):*

His birth brought into focus the need for me to understand where I stood in relationship to my work. I knew I faced two years when caring for a small child was exhausting. I thought, I am never going to write another word now. I have this short play that I have finished. When I return to New York, I will send it around. If no one accepts it, I will totally give up my writing; my husband is successful. We have two sons and for ten years I have struggled. While I had been in Africa I had sent part of a story to my agent at MCA and he had written back that he no longer thought he could do anything with my work.





Our son Adam:
His middle name was Patrice.

Myself:

We sailed back to New York on the *United States*. I had a completed play in my suitcase. How could I know it would establish me as a playwright and change my life? After years of writing, I had finally written of myself and my family and it would be on stage and in a book too, and I would be on the pages of *Vogue* and in Leonard Lyons' column.

And in a few months I would climb the steps to the Circle in the Square theater where I would see this play inside my suitcase performed, become a member of the Actors Studio (where Brando had been) and become a part of the Off-Broadway theater movement . . . a movement that in itself would come to occupy a powerful place in American theater history.