

place where things seem to be, rather than what they really are, *behind* the wall. This “play” is about the songs in the black community that we cannot all sing, this “play” is about needing not a hand clap, but a hand shake. My white assistant was terrified and electrified. I was simply terrified. This is a different “play,” and I don’t know if we can find its heritage in slave plays. This is a dark “play” which fewer and fewer of us have access to. On the other hand, we don’t all have access to Praise Valley, either.

There’s no one “play” for the black community anymore. There is no “black play.” There are many yet unspoken. So many that are only hints and gestures, so many that are yet unseen.

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New black math

10 years after writing the essay “the equation for black people on stage” Im standing at the same crossroads asking the same questions. No sweat. Sometimes you can walk a hundred miles and end up in the same spot. The world ain’t round for nothing, right? What is a black play? The definition is housed in the reality of two things that occurred recently and almost simultaneously: 26 August 05, playwright scholar poet-king August Wilson announces he is dying of cancer, and hurricane Katrina devastates the Gulf Coast. It feels like judgment day. What Im talking about today is the same and different. I was tidy back then. And now Im tidier. Tidier today like a tidal wave.

What is a black play?

A black play is angry.

A black play is fierce.

A black play is double voiced but rarely confused.

A black play got style.

A black play is of the people by the people and for the people.

A black play is smooth but not slick, heavy but not thick, cant be tamed, often does not comb its hair, wipes its mouth with the back of its black hand or with a linen napkin whichever is more readily available.

A black play is late.

A black play is RIGHT ON and RIGHT ON TIME.

A black play is deep.

A black play is armed / to the teeth.

A black play bows to god then rows the boat ashore.

A black play makes do if it got to / fights / screams / sings / dreams / WORKS IT / talks in code and tells it like it is ALL UP IN YA FACE.

A black play gives you five.

A black play is robust and alive.

A black play is in the house and looking *good*, too.

A black play is *bad* motherfucker.

A black play does not exist.

Every play is a black play.

SAY WHAT?

A black play is a white play when the lights go out.

A black play is a white play when you read between the lines.

A black play got its picture on the wall of your local post office.

A black play got its butt on death row for a crime it perhaps did not commit.

A black play got its black butt in the whitehouse, seated at the right hand of the man.

A black play keeps you up at night.

A black play is awake.

A black play gonna kick your ass.

A black play has genitals that people think about long after curtain comes down.

A black play is running for president.

A black play gotta get out the vote.

A black play is a leader, but seldom an elected official.

A black play as a child wondered why, if Jesse Owens won all them gold medals, then how come a black man couldn't beat a white man in a presidential race?

A black play is in the streets.

A black play aint no negro.

A black play is a nigger.

A black play is buck wild.

A black play is mixed.

A black play is on broadway, the great white way.

A black play is not on broadway, and furthermore, aint studying no broadway.

A black play is coming soon to a theatre near you.

A black play got a fro.

A black play know the know.

A black play go toe to toe, all the way out the do.

A black play gonna burn that m-f down, Monday-Friday and twice on the weekends.

A black play is chronic.

A black play takes into account that pollsters have found that black folks dont attend the theatres in numbers large enough to influence the selection of plays produced.

A black play is very intellectual.

A black play has studied, conducts discourse, and, on certain days of the week, can be found living in the big house of tradition.

A black play got a mission.

A black play dreams the impossible dream.

A black play is such things as dreams are made on.

A black play was the first black play ever to be written and will be the last black play standing.

A black play takes shape just outside the reaches of your white understanding, no matter what your color, baby.

A black play aint for you.

A black play aint about you.

A black play aint integrated and don't want to be.

A black play aint playing.

A black play knows that when audiences read it primarily through the rubric of "race relations," that those audiences are suffering from an acute attack of white narcissism. (If you have a need to see yourself reflected in things that are not directly about you, then you are one of the afflicted.)

A black play dont give a shit what you think.

A black play knows all about the black hole and the great hole of history and aint afraid of going there.

A black play sometimes puts its foot in its mouth, but, hell, a black play sometimes gots mouths to feed and shoe leather tastes like chicken when yr HONGRY.

A black play wants to know where HARRIET TUBMAN stay at?

A black play fights the power.

A black play wants to uplift the race.

A black play just might set the race back 10 years.

A black play is not political—that term don't even begin to approach its complexity, especially these days, dog.

A black play knows how to play the game.

A black play IZ.

A black play in the united states of america was ripped from the bosom of its motherland, caught by the man or sold down river by its brothers, crossed the atlantic in chains, had its gods smashed to bits and pieces, was handed Jesus as a pacifier (later, when Jesus wasn't working so good, welfare came into play), had its language ripped out its mouth, its family torn asunder—all this and more and a black play is still expected to play by the rules, is still expected to be interested in what the other deems interesting and valid and valued. HOW MUCH OF THAT SHIT CAN I BUY WITH FOODSTAMPS? Or, said another way: I PAY FIRST CLASS TAXES HOW COME I GET SECOND CLASS SERVICE? A black play aint playing your game, it might look like it's playing your game, but if it looks like that to you, then that just means you been played, honey.

A black play KNOWS what time it is.

A black play aint gonna give you the time of day.

A black play kicks a man when he's down, eats its own, has a faith in the system which is less a function of trust than confusion and fatigue, waits for the man to shape up his ship, in short makes all the mistakes of a great people fallen on hard times and working on getting they game back.

A black play is the feel good show of the century.

A black play is the blues.

A black play dont forget that in the 1980s mtv didnt want colored faces on its airwaves.

A black play dont forget the numerous hard times back in the olden days and the numerous hard times going on right now.

A black play keeps on keeping on.

A black play asks, where MARTIN and MALCOLM stay at?

A black play gets down.

A black play is old.

A black play is just getting started.

A black play asks, where MR. JAMES BALDWIN stay at?

A black play asks, where SATCHEL PAIGE and SON HOUSE and MEMPHIS MINNIE and GEORGE WASHINGTON CARVER and all them stay at?

A black play is often characterized by healthy doses of word play such as "snaps" and "yo Mamma" jokes.

A black play takes you to the bridge.

The Bridge. A black play by Suzan-Lori Parks

Characters: MOMMA, an older woman, and YO, her husband.

Setting: they sit atop their house which is under 20 feet of water. Helicopters from the National Guard in the near distance are about to perform a heroic rescue of our characters, but first:

YO: We just made the last payment on this house, too.
 MOMMA: Yo, sometimes it be's that way sometimes.
 YO: Everything we own is washed away.
 MOMMA: Bank owned the house, then us.
 YO: Now the flood owns everything, looks like.
 MAMMA: You know it, Yo.
 YO
 MAMMA
 (rest)
 YO: How can you tell a nigger thats crazy from a nigger that aint crazy?
 MAMMA: I don't know. How *can* you tell a nigger that's crazy from a nigger that aint crazy?
 YO: The crazy nigger is the nigger that aint crazy.

Curtain.

A black play is black.

A black play is asked to explain itself.

A black play is tempted to expose itself.

The black play got a message.

A black play knows the real deal.

A black play is told that it is about race and a black play knows it's really about other shit.

A black play knows that racerelations sell.

A black play knows that racerelations are a holding cell.

A black play is blacker than my new black cat, Houndog, named after Houndog Taylor, the blues guitarist, who is also a polydactyl brother.

A black play is blacker than black.

A black play is written by a black person.

A black play has black actors.

A black play is written by a white person and has white actors.

A black play doesnt have anything to do with black people. Im saying *The Glass Menagerie* is a black play.

SAY WHAT?

EXCUSE ME?!?!

Cause the presence of the white suggests the presence of the black. Every play that is born of the united states of america is a black play because we all exist in the shadow of slavery. All of us. *The Iceman Cometh* is a black play. *Angels in America* is a black play and Kushner knows he's a brother. Its all black.

The Intermission

What in God's name are we gonna do to help our brothers and sisters get to the promised land in this lifetime? I know it's not fashionable to ask these questions. I know it's not fashionable to suggest that we have some housekeeping to do. I know it's uncool to suggest that we got to do something other than lay our problems on the doorstep of the man. I know it's unhip to confront our own trip but what should we do? Wait for the man to clean HIS house? Oh please.

Sister on the Street: How did this essay about black theatre turn into a diatribe?

Brother on the Corner (shouting from the sidelines): What you know about diatribe? You don' know what a diatribe is, yr just talking "diatribe" so she'll put you in her essay.

Sister on the Street: And me being in her essay's gonna be the end of your world? Sides, she's got a point. We gotta take more responsibility. We gotta quit waiting on the man. Tomorrow is always a new day dawning, but dont it often smell of the Same Old Shit?

Brother on the Corner: SOS! Im with you on that!

Sister on the Street: If you waiting on the man you gonna be waiting all your life.

Brother on the Corner: Plus in your next life too, dont forget about *karma* and shit.

Sister on the Street: People wanna be free but they spend their entire existence waiting on the man.

Brother on the Corner: Instead of breaking FREE and leading a whole lot of people to FREEDOM with them.

Sister on the Street: Damn right.

Black Playwright: Either of you two got some change? My cellphone dont work around here and I need to use the payphone. Im putting in a call to Harriet Tubman. Im putting in a call to Nat Turner. Im calling up John Brown and Fredrick Douglass and Ms. Sojourner Truth. They are still here. Cause when they died they MULTIPLIED. Operator? We gotta crack the heart wide open cause when it healed up last time it healed up wrong, crack it open and reset it, heal it right. Crack the mind wide open cause when it healed up, our thoughts healed up wrong.

Brother on the Corner (rest): Do she know that pay phone don't work?

Sister on the Street: Yeah, she knows.

Black Playwright: Audiences still ask "what do black people think about such and such?" Black people think the world is fucked. Thats what black people think. Black people dont always use apostrophes neither. Black people took the rallying cry "burn baby burn" and turned it into the chorus of "Disco Inferno" and some of us danced all the way to the bank, thats what black people think. Black people know there is a war going on against our blackness and somehow we've been enlisted to fight on the front lines.

Brother on the Corner: Whats she talking about now?

Sister on the Street: A black play.

Brother on the Corner: Go ahead, girl.

End of Intermission

A black play fights the power.

A black play sometimes does not make it to the page or stage and consists of just some high-powered thoughts going on inside the bright blackness of yr head.

A black play is doctor heal-good cause theatre is a healing thing.

A black play gives us a role to play and, when someone steps into that role, the rest of us got someone like us to look at. Seeing yrself mirrored is a basic component of healthy psychological development. Im not talking about creating a series of model behaviors, but roles, like the roles in the passion play—you know what a passion play is—like when they reenact the journey of Christ on easter and the town gathers to watch an actor go through his moments as he carries his cross up the hill & c. So the black playwright gives us a role. Because it is in having a role that we have an opportunity to imaginatively participate. And it is through participation that we work out the demons.

A black play is a poem, like a life is a poem, like the bible is a poem, like the bhagavad-gita is a poem, a “song of god,” “no effort is ever wasted,” it says and “you have rights to your actions but not rights to the fruits of your actions,” it says. The charioteer opens his mouth and shows us that he is the infinite.

A black play embraces the infinite.

A black play is . . . August Wilson. 2 Oct 2005: He died today.

A black play asks, where MR. AUGUST WILSON stay at?

A black play is not ignorant of history, but neither is the play history’s slave.

A black play is tragic.

A black play is funny as hell.

A black play has contempt for the other. And love too.

A black play is currently studying how such a love and such a contempt can coexist in the same heart, in the same breath.

A black play plays well in countries where there are no “black” people—and yet, helps those in those countries to identify themselves as “black.”

A black play employs the black not just as a subject, but as a platform, eye and telescope through which it intercourses with the cosmos.

A black play has at least one panther in it.

A black play recognizes the importance of the evidence of things unseen.

A black play is too much.

A black play can take you there.

A black play is simple.

A black play is COMPLICATED.

A black play is ALL THAT.

A black play is a piece of work.

A black play is worth the price of admission.

A black play is free.

PEACE

And

POWER

To the PEOPLE.

SUZAN-LORI PARKS



The struggle continues

What is a black play? What is acting black? The truth is, I am much more interested in the questions—and more questions—that these questions set off. What are these questions about? What makes them so worrisome? What do they have to do with white people's desires? And will this inquiry call up substantial, ongoing critical looks at the wide range of work by black theatre artists?

Writing and playing black are hard work. That is the easy answer to these questions. Black playwrights and actors need inspiration, talent, and long-term connections to black voices—literally and symbolically. Both tasks require a willingness to play with language—the meanings and the music of it, and certainly a vulnerability to the lessons of black history and politics. And white people, as has been the case with music and dance throughout the last few centuries, are, I suspect, beginning to wonder how to write and act black because they see the value of blackness and have exploited it—both artistically and economically. One of the troubles with American-style democracy is that cultural appropriation reigns freely and continues to be subtle. Questions of appropriation, authenticity, and ownership must be constantly examined.

For this discourse I find it useful to look from a personal/bigger view (a practice of relating the personal experience to larger public topics), to color my offering with experiences that continue to help me see. I am reminded of the concerns for cultural genocide that need to be dug up from the heap of what was dismissed as “rhetoric” in the latter part of the twentieth century. I think of a couple of lines in my play *Sally's Rape*:

JEANNIE: What about rhetoric?

ROBBIE: Oh, yes, they learned rhetoric. My mother said rhetoric was learning to tell the truth over and over.