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Pause and Re-set: Reflections on the Virtual Theatre Festival "The Work of Adrienne Kennedy: Inspiration and Influence"

Theatre Review

Lara Cox

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Pause and Re-set: Reflections on the Virtual Theatre Festival “The Work of Adrienne Kennedy: Inspiration and Influence”

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Factual Information about the festival

- 1 Organized by Round House and McCarter Theatres, Washington D.C.
Artistic Director of Round House: Ryan Rilette
Associate Artistic Director of McCarter: Nicole A Watson
Director of *He Bought her Heart Back in a Box*: Nicole A. Watson
Director of *Sleep Deprivation Chamber*: Raymond O Caldwell
Director of *Ohio State Murders*: Valerie Curtis-Newton
Director of *Etta and Ella on the Upper West Side*: Timothy Douglas

Websites

- 2 McCarter Theatre Center, “The Work of Adrienne Kennedy: Inspiration and Influence”:
<https://www.mccarter.org/adriennekennedy>
- 3 McCarter Theatre Center, “The Work of Adrienne Kennedy: Inspiration and Influence”/
program: https://www.roundhousetheatre.org/roundhouse/media/documents/AK_Program.pdf
- 4 McCarter Theatre Center, “The Work of Adrienne Kennedy: Inspiration and Influence”/
overview: <https://www.roundhousetheatre.org/On-Stage/Explore/The-Work-of-Adrienne-Kennedy-Inspiration-Influence>

Review

- 5 American theatre is experiencing an identity crisis intimately bound up with the COVID-19 pandemic but not simply a result of the financial hit the industry is taking. With the closure of theatres, Black, Indigenous and People of Color (BIPOC) theatre-makers are physically removed from white board directors, producers, actors, and investors that dominate American theatre. In the current lockdown limbo, BIPOC jobs in theatre, already scant, are less prominently on the line (Sayet, “Decolonizing New Play Development”). The BIPOC theatre community have seized on this moment to make those in power sit up and listen. The open letter “We See You, White American Theatre” and the raft of measures outlined in “BIPOC Demands for White American Theatre” published in mid-2020 by the collective “The Ground We Stand On” had over three hundred signatories. Major American theatres are publishing details of their intentions to overhaul the system that promotes white domination at their institutions.
¹ While it remains to be seen whether these statements will lead to long-standing changes, the virtual theatre festival “The Work of Adrienne Kennedy: Inspiration and Influence” organized by Round House Theatre and McCarter Theatre Center in Washington D.C. hardly seems a chance affair. Spearheaded, produced, and performed by many BIPOC actors, directors, and behind-the-scenes technicians, this festival—dedicated to the African American playwright Adrienne Kennedy—contained a “pause and re-set” ethos that reflects the way “The Ground We Stand On” has chosen to react to the pandemic.
- 6 The festival ran between November 14, 2020 and February 28, 2021, and brought back to the stage two of Kennedy’s older plays featuring the academic protagonist Suzanne Alexander, *Ohio State Murders* (1992) and *Sleep Deprivation Chamber* (1996). Highlighting Kennedy’s newer work, the festival also featured *He Brought Her Heart Back in a Box* (2018) and, the world premiere of *Etta and Ella on the Upper West Side*, which was published in 2020 by Theatre Communications Group, New York. Four panels were also organized and livestreamed via YouTube, opening the discussion of Kennedy’s work to audience member participation: “Influence and Imagination” (on the topic of Kennedy’s influence on women of color playwrights); “Acting Adrienne Kennedy”; “Critical Reflections”; and “The Black Avant-Garde”. Throughout the panels, a paradox is highlighted. Kennedy is somewhat of a “rock star on the [American] college circuit” (Crystal Dickinson, “Acting Adrienne Kennedy,” 00:06:02), her Obie award-winning *Funnyhouse of A Negro* (1964) being a staple of theatre program curricula. However, her work has been sporadically performed and scandalously underproduced. This virtual theatre festival builds on the sole exception to this pattern of neglect: New York’s Signature Theatre, which dedicated its entire 1995-1996 season to staging Kennedy’s plays.
- 7 As performance artist and director Daniel Alexander Jones points out, during the festival’s “Black Avant-garde” panel, a “power dynamic”, based on white and male domination, undergirds American theatre companies’ dismissal of Kennedy’s work as “not making sense” for audiences (00:26:00). Kennedy’s work is non-linear, fragmentary, and resolutely experimental, but these characteristics never hindered the staging of plays by white male avant-gardists such as Edward Albee—who was Kennedy’s mentor—and Samuel Beckett—to whom Kennedy has been compared

(Douglas qtd. in Wren 2020). If Kennedy has been aligned with the “Theatre of the Absurd” (Enriquez 2017), her oeuvre is also virtually unknown to French stages, Absurdism’s homeland. The only exception to this is Augy Hayter’s French-language adaptation of *Funnyhouse* (“Drôle de Baraque”), directed by Jean-Marie Serreau and staged at the Odéon-Théâtre de l’Europe in 1968, starring Toto Bissainthe in the role of protagonist Sarah.

- 8 The panels of the 2021 virtual festival dwell on the enduring power of Kennedy’s work. Her début play in 1964 dared to portray a mixed race character Sarah both coveting whiteness and manifesting self-hate because of the power of white supremacy—an unpopular ambiguity for the Black Arts Movement with its commitment to the themes of racial uplift, the rejection of whiteness, and a “Black is beautiful” ethos. In the “Acting Adrienne Kennedy” panel, Crystal Dickinson, who played Sarah in the 2016 Signature Theatre reprisal of *Funnyhouse*, argues that Kennedy’s recourse to aesthetic fragmentariness and narrative non-linearity to capture Black women’s reality in the United States remains as relevant in today’s world—where racism, sexism, and colorism persist—as it was in 1964. The panels of this festival collectively call for a rehabilitation of Kennedy, who will turn ninety this year and is still writing, on the American stage.
- 9 If “Zoom theatre” has been lauded as a salve for those missing the liveness of the theatrical encounter, this festival demonstrates that pre-recorded theatre created especially for lockdown audiences can be well-crafted and impactful. The productions, filmed in the Round House Theatre, were a self-conscious rejection of Zoom, a platform that has become so ubiquitous in recent months that work and leisure problematically blend in one space (Rilette, “An Inside Look with the Festival Directors”, 00:19:58). The actors play to an empty theatre, and are socially distanced from one another, but this only helps highlight the division across the color line that is a major theme of Kennedy’s work. The would-be couple Kay (played by Maya Jackson) and Chris (Michael Sweeney Hammond) in *He Brought her Heart Back in a Box*, read from socially-distanced lecterns as a visual translation of the gulf separating Black women from white men in America—a history, as this play reminds us, stained by white masters’ abuse, rape, and lethal violence against Black women. This was the first play of the festival, released on its start date November 14, 2020, and was directed by Nicole A Watson, McCarter Theatre Associate Artistic Director and a “prime mover” (Wren 2020) behind this joint venture with the Round House Theatre. The production is striking because it captures the imagistic layers of Kennedy’s plays without sacrificing the theatrical for the filmic. At the beginning of the drama, a series of images and texts evoking Jim Crow segregation are flashed before our eyes, as a visual reminder of a history and context that will eventually catch up with Kay and Chris, and make their love story impossible. This fast-moving collage is the result of what Watson calls “some post-production bedazzling” (Watson, “An Inside Look,” 00:20:17). Meanwhile, a miniature model staircase and door signal the physical space of a school store room where these Jim Crow remnants may be found, approximating the feel of the set design of a theatre rather than a filmic recreation of real space—and therefore calling upon our sense of disbelief that is specific to the act of theatrical viewing.

Figure 1

Socially distanced actors in *He Bought Her Heart Back in a Box* as a translation of the obstacles to interracial love.

© Round House Theatre

- 10 One of the core features of Kennedy’s work is that is laden with ghosts, connecting current sexist and racist realities in America to the “ancestral truth[s]” of the theatre canon as arts critic and director Regina Victor and panelist of “Critical Reflections” describes (00:46:30). The festival organizers’ choice to film the plays in the theatre space emptied of its audiences complements perfectly the ghostliness intrinsic to Kennedy’s work. Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* hovers over the plot of *Sleep Deprivation Chamber*, the second play of the festival (released on November 21, 2020) which Kennedy co-wrote with her son Adam after he was attacked by a white police officer. The almost-unavenged murder in *Hamlet* of a sleeping and defenseless king is a parallel motif to African American Teddy Alexander’s beating by white police officer, Holzer, and the latter’s protection by the white supremacist legal system in *Sleep Deprivation Chamber*. Though physical contact was prohibited owing to sanitary protocol, Deimoni Brewington, who played Teddy Alexander, captures the horror of the beating as it is re-told during the play’s final trial, miming the action of his head being slammed to the hard ground. Echoes of Black Lives Matter and George Floyd are palpable as Teddy Alexander (Brewington) gasps for oxygen and cries out repeatedly, “I can’t breathe” (Kennedy and Kennedy 41). The unsympathetic District Attorney, a white woman named “Ms. Wagner” (Jjana Valentiner), also resonates with Black Lives Matter’s current focus on the white women—known under the shorthand “Karen”—who uphold racism in America.

Figure 2

Deimoni Brewington's simulates the assault by white police officer Holzer in *Sleep Deprivation Chamber*.

© Round House Theatre

- 11 The production team of *Sleep Deprivation Chamber* blended the play's present-day resonance with the text's spectral ancestors: shots of a crackled, white screen function as transitions between waking reality and dreamscape, as a visual complement to the poetic polysemy of the text. Perhaps these stark, white transitions conjure the spectre of Ophelia, *Hamlet*'s heroine driven to insanity by abandonment by her suitor and grief for her father, whose "betrayal" and "disillusionment" is mentioned at the start of the play (Kennedy and Kennedy 12). Mother Suzanne Alexander (played by Kim James Bey) may be the contemporary equivalent of Shakespeare's heroine, her own disillusionment emerging as governor, senators, county managers, and even a sneering defense lawyer fail to answer her pleas for legal justice for her beaten son. She describes a "suffocation" akin to the fate that met Shakespeare's drowned heroine, before the white transition screen cuts to the next segment. The blanched camera shots may also be a visual metonymy for the play's constant allusions to erasure and disappearance—of the legacy of racial justice character Uncle March Alexander, also driven to insanity by the persistence of white supremacy; of the Cleveland neighborhood where Suzanne Alexander grew up, which became submerged by creek water; of her letters to justice officials, which she suspects were intercepted; and of the film of the beating made by Teddy Alexander's brother, Daniel Jr., too unclear to stand up as evidence in court.
- 12 In the "Critical Reflections" panel moderator Jill Dolan reflects on the challenges facing theatre-makers as they adapt to digitalization, deprived of a key tool of the medium: theatre's live nature. This festival proves that, on occasion, digital theatre can rise to the challenge and "astonish" (to borrow Dolan's word) spectators ("Critical Reflections", 00:33:30). *Ohio State Murders*, directed by Valerie Curtis-Newton and the third play to be released by the festival (on December 5, 2020), tells a tragic tale of a white male professor "Hampshire" (played by Rex Daugherty) who murders his twin daughters born to his young Black student, Suzanne Alexander (played by Billie Krishawn and Lynda Gravátt). The play lulls spectators into a false sense of security by

jumping around in time and revealing the murders before dramatic tension has the time to mount. But this does not stop the play from landing a proverbial punch as it ends. The present-day Suzanne Alexander returns to the question posed to her by academics at the start of the drama about the origins of the violence in her work. Lynda Gravátt, who was the only performer to be filmed off-site during the production (at her home in New Jersey), cultivates an air of scholarly detachment throughout the drama, mobilizing the digital background of books behind her. As she reaches the conclusion of the unimaginable tragedy that happened to her daughters, she re-addresses her academic interlocutors. In a deadpan voice, she offers the answer: “And *that* is the main source of violent imagery in my work [...] Thank you”. The explanation that it was the murder of her daughters by their father combined with the Gravátt’s expressionless face and voice capture a moment of horrific irony also found in the text. The moment denies catharsis to spectators and satirizes the scholarly “objectivity” of the white academy that had posed the question to character Suzanne Alexander in the first place—it is this same academy that covered up the babies’ murders to protect Professor Hampshire.

Figure 3

Lynda Gravátt, as present-day Suzanne Alexander, against a digital backdrop of books. Gravátt was the only actor filmed offsite at her home in New Jersey.

© Round House Theatre

- 13 The last play in the selection *Etta and Ella on the Upper West Side* was a world premiere, directed by Timothy Douglas and released on January 9, 2021. It was a fitting end to the festival not simply because it forms part of Kennedy’s newest published work, but also because the heroines of this play are not victims (as seen in the previous plays) but the *agents* of violence. About two warring sisters vying to outdo each other in their academic accomplishments, the play announces from the beginning that a murder will be committed. Etta is goaded on by the apparition of her sister Ella, whom she had strangled; possessed by her sister’s spirit, Etta stabs repeatedly her “only friend” (Kennedy 2020, 71) Boulting, and fellow member of the ghostly Vanishing Literary Club. The play is a challenge to set to the stage—more of a writing experiment than a script as there are no clearly demarcated lines for the characters. The text plays with time,

and several scenes or chapters are announced together—for instance, “6, 7, 8” (Kennedy 2020, 55). The play’s prelude briefly mentions the crux of the text: that the narrator’s true identity is the apparition Ella Harrison and that this will be discovered in scene or chapter twenty. However, once readers arrive at the scene, no hint of how we discover the narrator’s identity is given. The production team and director Timothy Douglas decided to preserve Kennedy’s textual experimentalism in projections on the screen of the scene or chapter numbers and the characters’ action lines. Discerning viewers realize only from the end credits that the narrator is Ella Harrison.

- 14 *Etta and Ella on the Upper West Side* is also a challenging piece to perform because the narrator, who is really the “apparition” Ella Harrison, also enacts the roles of all characters: Etta, Ella (the sisters), Troupe and his assistant Robert (scholars fascinated by the sisters’ relationship), Boulting (Etta’s “only friend” and murder victim) and his sister Kay. Actress Caroline Clay pulls off the feat deftly. Acting in Signature Theatre’s 1995-1996 Adrienne Kennedy season (“Acting Adrienne Kennedy”, 00:10:21), Clay is also an experienced vocal coach, audiobook, and radio narrator (the *Griot Series*, *The Blood Quilt*, *King Hedley*).² She enlivens Kennedy’s writing experiment with her mastery of pacing (and unbearably tense pauses) and vocal tones that run the gamut from indignation and jealousy (felt by the sisters), to derision and transcendence through song (Troupe’s repulsion/fascination with the sisters, and his love of African American Spirituals). As Clay remarked in the “Acting Adrienne Kennedy” panel, “[Kennedy] is writing for our [African Americans]’ voice” (00:10:11). Her vocal modulations as she switches effortlessly between characters in *Etta and Ella on the Upper West Side* demonstrate the actress’s conviction in that statement.

Figure 4

Caroline Clay captures switches effortlessly between characters in *Etta and Ella on the Upper West Side*.
© Round House Theatre

- 15 Zoom theatre has flourished as a stopgap to conjure up the ephemerality of live performance; the pre-recorded productions of “The Work of Adrienne Kennedy: Inspiration and Influence” are a reverse call to viewers to take their time in exploring this playwright’s oeuvre. Throughout the four-month period during which these plays were available, the festival invited us to choose the pace at which we watch the work,

to pause it, to pore over it, to replay it. Time is a vital ingredient in discovering the world of Adrienne Kennedy, which as playwright Eisa Davis notes may be intensely rich in literary and theatrical references, but is also one in which themes “continue, revise, and repeat over and over again” (“Influence and Imagination”, 00:02:50).

- 16 We discover Kennedy’s repeating and shifting motifs not least of all in the choice of programming, which did not follow the order in which the plays were written. In *Sleep Deprivation Chamber*, motifs of abysses abounded: the forgotten NAACP activist Uncle March’s (Marty Lamar) declaration that the characters “live near the epicenter” (Kennedy and Kennedy 73), Suzanne Alexander’s dream looking out from Yorick’s grave (another Hamletian spectre), a homeless woman’s revelation that a subterranean plot to blow up the city is underway, and the water from Dale Creek that submerged the heroine’s childhood home. *Ohio State Murders* (1992), written before but released after *Sleep Deprivation Chamber* (1996) in this festival, elucidates the significance of the abyss: from the time of Arthurian legend, abyssal terrains have delivered revenants from the underworld. This leads us to reflect on the possibility of a double meaning of the abyssal motif in the previous play of the festival, *Sleep Deprivation Chamber*: perhaps the tale is a testament to the characters’ survival through a farce legal procedure promoting white interests, or perhaps it constitutes their descent into Hell from which they never emerge. Likewise, the festival’s last play *Etta and Ella on the Upper West Side* picks up the central murder of Suzanne Alexander’s babies in *Ohio State Murders*, the piece immediately preceding it in the festival program. The tragedy is reframed as Etta Harrison’s. Her sister Ella appropriated her sister’s misfortunes for the purposes of writing entertaining fiction. This festival, as much in its order of programming as in its duration, persuaded us to forge connections, to break them, and think again, aptly capturing the palimpsestic and poetic scope of Kennedy’s work.
- 17 “The Work of Adrienne Kennedy: Inspiration and Influence” contains a promise as much as it represents a chance for us to pause over the extraordinary work of Adrienne Kennedy. With the exception of *Etta and Ella on the Upper West Side*, all the scripts are read by the actors. As Round House artistic director Ryan Rilette stated: “We’re not trying to do fully produced digital shows [...] We’re trying to do staged readings that really bring the plays to life, along with some sound and visuals that help flesh out the world” (qtd. in Wren 2020). In the festival’s unapologetic unfinishedness lies the real imperative: to give Adrienne Kennedy’s work the full attention it deserves on American stages in full-scale productions once the pandemic is over. This festival should be taken as rehearsal for the real thing. The reverberations of Caroline Clay’s heels as she exits the stage with painstaking slowness at the end of *Etta and Ella on the Upper West Side*, the festival’s final play, stir our sense of longing to inhabit the physical space of the theatre with actors treading the boards in Adrienne Kennedy characters well after lockdown has lifted.

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- “An Inside Look with the Festival Directors.” Panel discussion with Ryan Rilette, Sarah Rasmussen, Nicole A Watson, Valerie Curtis-Newton, and Timothy Douglas. 27 October, 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cqa1iDOSryA&list=PLYgJpPYrc3eRZ7Y5POQHrOPForyZW9whp> (accessed 2 February 2021).
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NOTES

1. For instance, the three theatres mentioned in this review have all released written responses to “We See You, White American Theatre”: McCarter Theatre and Round House Theatre, Washington D.C., and Signature Theatre in New York.
See: <https://www.mccarter.org/explore/staff-framing-statement/> (accessed 2 February 2021)
https://www.roundhousetheatre.org/Commitment_to_Anti-Racism (accessed 2 February 2021),

<https://signaturetheatre.org/News/Equity-Diversity-Inclusion-Access.aspx#WSYWAT> (accessed 2 February 2021). For other examples see: Baltimore Center Stage, <https://www.centerstage.org/about/social-accountability/> (accessed 2 February 2021), and Woolly Mammoth Theatre, Washington D.C.: <https://www.woollymammoth.net/we-see-you-wat> (accessed 2 February 2021). 2. See Caroline Clay’s website: <https://www.claycreatives.org/rsum> (accessed 2 February 2021).

ABSTRACTS

Review of “The Work of Adrienne Kennedy: Inspiration and Influence”. Online theatre festival. November 14 2020 – February 28, 2021.

Compte-rendu de “The Work of Adrienne Kennedy: Inspiration and Influence”. Festival de théâtre en ligne. 14 novembre 2020 – 28 février 2021.

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