Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Talking with Owa

Jaz Dorsey · Thursday, April 26th, 2012

On Monday, January 1, 2007, I sent out an email founding The African American Playwrights Exchange. By Wednesday, January 3 I had heard from about 30 playwrights.

As the year went on, the numbers continued to grow and I spent the first six months of 2007 reading an onslaught of plays by these playwrights that ranged from African American history to contemporary dramas and social issue plays. Then along came Owa.

As with all the playwrights who had contacted me, I asked Owa to send me an sample of his work and he sent me a piece called *Funnylingus*. I read it and realized that I had come face to face (in cyberspace) with an absurdist. *Funnylingus* is one of those plays that is definitely open to interpretation, but for me it is one of most alarming things I have ever read, exploring as it does the conflict between the theatre and the church through two characters – an actress named Zelda who is delivering a very disturbing monologue when a priest seated in the audience confronts her, accuses her of blasphemy and then rapes her and strangles her with a rosary. Interestingly, neither role called specifically for black actors and this was the first script I had read from an AAPEX writer that did not focus on African American history or social issues.

In 2010, on a trip to NYC, I was able to catch the red Harlem Readers presentation of another of Owa's scripts, *Our Father* – in which a white God has his white family, and a Black Jesus balks at returning to earth after the way he was treated the first time.

Over the past 5 years I have followed Owa on his journey, which has included numerous presentations of his theatre pieces and a string of rants about social stupidity and other "peas under the mattress" of our lives. Personally I think that Owa is one of the most important dramatists of our age, but you won't see his work on any LORT mainstages, that's for sure. Still, I wouldn't want you to miss knowing about this amazing artist, so, Ladies and Gentlemen, I give you: Owa.

Where were you born and what schools did you attend?

I was born July 28, 1944 in New York City's Harlem hospital. I attended public schools; P.S. 89 (kindergarten) P.S. 68 (grade) Frederick Douglas (Junior) and Benjamin Franklin (High) I have masters from Lincoln University and hold a PHD in psychology from Westbrook University.

What role did theatre and the arts play in your childhood and upbringing?

Actually, very little. Live theater for Black people during the 50's and 60's meant performance: Jazz and comedians at the Apollo Theater.

In junior high we covered in English class, *Macbeth* for a taste of theater, and Charles Dickens for a taste of literature. Also there were a few more American authors—all white. In music we covered

show tunes, I remember mostly, Oklahoma! Being a major topic, and a scant review of Afro-Cubano influences. It was a really strange time, black teachers' teachings nothing about black arts. Higher education was about career and not art.

How would you describe your own evolution as an artist?

In my youth my father enrolled me in tap dance class overr the Apollo Theater because he felt I was light skinned and could make it as a performer in theater. After a few weeks, I quit. In the mid-sixties I met a young playwright form Ohio named OyamO who came to NYC to join the New Lafayette Theater Company with Ed Bullins, and then and there, though I never attended one show there, I wanted to be a playwright.

At the time I was a drug addict and had a serious struggle going on with my life. It was the sixties, we were told to "turn off and tune out"—which I did. As a result, I missed the Vietnam war.

My family was wiped out as a result of hard living and deprivations of sundry kinds. My first wife had left me. Slept on a lot of park benches and did some dazed roaming around on the Bowery. Saw the inside of some very nasty prisons: Sing-Sing etc. I was in deep water and sinking fast. While in the clinker, I got politicized, Like Malcolm X I joined the Black Muslims, unlike Malcolm I couldn't accept their objectionable version of reality and ended up a Black Panther, found them unbelievably naive and routine as well, and as a result, finally settled on a modified Marxist/ Leninism perception. Since I had dropped out of high school, I took advantage of prison libraries, reading the philosophers, Greek and other European playwrights and a whole lot of revolutionary literature; Frantz Fanon and others. These were crazy fast times, I was in a coupla prison riots, spent time in solitary and finally , on one of my stays on NYC Rikers Island where I met after much struggle with the authorities, Akila Columbus and Beverly Morris; who headed up a group of prison theater players called Theatre of the Forgotton (TFTF). There I acted in my first show: *Does a Tiger Wear a Necktie?*

I loved it. I wanted to write. Others wanted me to act.

Thirty days out of prison I was slated to leave for Mexico as an actor with a leftist group (Mexicans were the poverty project of choice in those days). I related this to OyamO who asked if I wanted to go with him to Africa as a third assistant writer. I quipped: "when do we leave." I worked in Ethiopia and, Tanzania.

When did you first encounter "absurdism" in theatre and which authors influenced/inspired your appreciation of and fascination with this genre?

I encountered the absurd life in Harlem before, during and after the murder of JFK, Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, lots of others unsung and forgotten and the ensuing riots that put a purloined television into the homes of many. I also had a very good shot of it in prison where most of the inmates were minority. Later on I encountered more of the same as a journalist in Rome attending the UN First World Food Conference. In theater, it was Amiri Baraka's short play *Police!* A totally non-commercial, provocative and unproducable script. A normal person would have avoided it like the plague. Since I had brain damage as a result of the drugs and alcohol, I was truly fascinated. I looked for more, I read Pinter, Ionesco and the likes. I was terribly impressed with Edward Albee and rewrote my own version of *The Zoo Story* called *Bloodrite*. It was accepted at the 1978 Eugene O'Neill Playwrights Conference with Edith Oliver and Martin Esslin as my dramaturgs.

I didn't know I was to be cited as an absurdist. I only knew life as an ungraspable and inexplicable ride on the wild side of the street.

Where folk thought one way and acted out in other ways. Conventional dramas did not resonate with me the same way the sick and insane aspects of humanity did in the absurdist landscape.

Based on the plays you have written which might fall into the absurdist genre, how would you define your own absurdist agenda – and what does he absurdist view of life offer you as a

playwright?

This is a very difficult question for me. Despite (in later years) my hefty education, by definition I am “street corner Negro.” One just can’t escape this upbringing. In this field of play one talked straight and pertinent. My agenda as a playwright is the same. Life is far too precious, sacred and short to miss the point of it all. The difficult part for me is my kind at the present moment does not buy theater tickets. Their theater is right there on the streets and it seems entertaining and dramatic enough. As for the general theater going public and those who produce for them, they don’t seem particularly attuned to the twisted and vauntedly mired mess humanity finds itself wallowing in, and would rather be distracted than confronted and unconfused.

American Theater is currently a place to hide in a darkened room with others–living vicariously in the dramatic gossip of imaginary characters dissuading us from really looking at that rhinoceros shitting on the rug in the room. It seems to me, my agenda for me, to at least mention the smell is not just something rotten in Denmark. When I do, people call me absurd. The theatrical weltanschauung I have adapted as an expressive doctrine of a world view depicts an utter immediacy and an exploration of the unexplainable with a deepening penetration into the heart of the human condition.

This is of course all very problematic for audiences who have worked, paid taxes and done the right thing to be bellowed at by an insane playwright with an absurdist agenda, snatching facades off of the highly regarded patina of a principled life. The social contract is inviolate and I dare to question it. In a certain sense, I appreciate John the Baptist. I am however, careful to keep my head clear when approached by dancing girls named Salome.

What specific life experiences of your own put the absurdist spin on your relationship to reality as you have come to know it?

This is even a more difficult question to answer than the preceding one. I suppose the straight answer would be the injection of cocaine directly into my bloodstream for a few decades. But since I have been clean and sober for a quarter of a century this may not be the easy and accurate answer. Further consideration on the subject would probably be best exemplified by a profound sense of freedom, justice, and equality for the inhabitants of this planet. Where there are ample resources to provide for each according to his or her needs. A world where greed is just as criminal as theft. Where consumerism is a malicious word and peace is not a fantasy for the death of our young people in meaningless wars fought over meaningless beliefs whether they are political, religious or sectarian.

How do the elements of absurdism relate to the African American experience in the second half of the twentieth century?

Wow, it gets tougher huh? Black people live an absurdist life. They help elect their first black president. He returns the favor by bombing an African nation. I’m not at all certain many blacks here recognize Libya as a bona -fide African state. He addresses the concerns of the middle class. To be midldel class one must have a job. Blacks in the main are not middle class because in the main, they do not have jobs.

I suppose the accurate answer to this query is the same thing it does in the current 21st century and all the live long centuries prior. Humanity is a creature of its ego. Black people in America are, far and wide, sorta bereft of true ego and, as a result, they are victimized by the egoism of others.

One important elemental issue in my theatrical take of the drama is the vixenish portrayal of the colored homosexual in black drama. As long as they are seen as sissified caricatures, they can set foot on stage in costume and under lights. As Tyler Perry’s money making scripts have demonstrated. There is this absurd belief in black theater from the last century and into the present

that only heterosexual love conquers all. If this is the central belief of black theater goers, then they are subject to belief in anything. Producers of black dramas are touchy on the subject and seem to fish only in safe waters. The absurdity of it all is typified in black preachers caught in the act, who settle out of court, lose their trophy wives and the congregations continue to load their coffers with money that would be better spent on one of my shows.

We have and suffer deeply rooted identity issues. As a matter-of- fact, we're not even "African" Americans, African emigrants whether from the north or sub–Sahara are this newly minted group. We are Americans by situation, training and inclination. This is a poignant factor in the absurdity of our existence in this our final resting place. As Sartre points out in his absurdist manner, there is *No Exit*…

Image: Owa standing on the block where he was born in Harlem.

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