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Book Review

25 Plays from The Fire This Time Festival: A Decade of Recognition, Resistance, Resilience, Rebirth and Black Theater, edited by Kelley Nicole Girod, London: Methuen Drama, 2022[1]

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Editor Kelley Nicole Girod informs us that the title of the festival is a take on James Baldwin's influential book on race relations in 1960s America, *The Fire Next Time*, which Baldwin himself took from a Negro spiritual, *Mary Don't You Weep*. She states that Baldwin's book, 'pays homage to the African American legacy and responds to our ancestors' calls to each generation to take up the torch passed that will continue to lead us further into the future.' Girod founded the festival in 2009 in response to 'amplify the voices of Black playwrights and storytellers' and to 'show the vast spectrum of Blackness, and move beyond common ideas of what's possible in Black theater, a benchmark that has too long been dictated by the overwhelming white gaze of American theater' (1). Thus, the playwrights are given free rein to explore whatever themes they choose, hence the eclectic nature of the themes, genres and styles in this collection of twenty-five ten-minute plays that have been selected from the Festival's thirteen years of existence.

The collection is divided thematically into seven sections, each with an introduction and a foreword. The plays in Section 1 interrogate the association of the black body with Eurocentric beauty standards and how Black features that were previously labelled as ugly are now appropriated by non-Blacks and commodified as markers of beauty. The plays in this section not only interrogate these notions of beauty but also show how they are challenged and resisted by Black people.

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In *The Beyoncé Effect*, Katori Hall uses tropes of the fairytale and myth to explore her three female characters' quest for the perfect skin. Hall depicts the global nature of Eurocentric beauty standards: Fury 1 is Indian, Fury 2 is African while Fury 3 is African American. Each has their reasons for using toxic skin bleaching products, the unifying factor being the favouring of light skin over dark skin. Each Fury confronts their self-doubts about their appearance and their struggle with society's acceptance of proximity to whiteness as the hallmark of beauty. In the end, they succumb to this racialised notion of beauty.

Citizen Jane by Derek Lee McPhatter is a futuristic story about the titular character, the 'super-shero par ex-cellence' (sic). The focus is not on race, as McPhatter's notes state that the characters 'live in the future, beyond our current ideas of race, gender, identity, and so forth'. Citizen Jane is being celebrated through a recreation of her past heroics via a virtual exhibition. This supposedly ideal world unravels when Citizen Jane questions the events of the exhibition and reality triumphs. Antoinette Nwandu's *Vanna White Has Got to Die!* is a comic fantasy in which a manifestation of real-life TV hostess Vanna White appears as a 'predator in whiteface', haunting the mind and the relationship of a couple. Her hold over them is released only when they face up to the truth about themselves as a bi-racial couple.

Another manifestation of a famous white female appears in Roger Q. Mason's *Hard Palate*, in the form of Brooke Shields. She is the doubting voice of gay writer Quentin, whose Catholic upbringing and his predilection for worrying prevent him from having relationships until he meets HIV-positive Clayton. Mason's play considers issues surrounding gay dating via dating apps and the current medical advancements that allow HIV-positive gay men to lead healthy sex lives.

Section 2 is titled 'The Cost of Education: Confronting the Effects of Racial Disparity in America's Education System'. Dominique Morisseau's *Third Grade*, like her full-length 2017 play *Pipeline*, highlights several factors that hold back the education of young black boys in an encounter between a teacher and a parent. Tracey Conyer Lee traces the black experience in a predominantly white university through the relationship between a Black male student and his White female professor. Here, Lee weighs the cost of trying to be anonymous in a space where you stand out due to your skin colour, where simply slouching while Black is interpreted as 'threats, affronts, and aberrations' (54). Francesca Da Silveira's *scholarship babies* examines the disparities in the American education system that can have an enduring effect on Black people. University friends Leena and Kevin accompany Felicia to a society function on a boat but the boat leaves without them. Felicia has been turned down for a grant for her graduate studies and cannot afford the fees on her own. With no wealthy family to support her, she must rely on the charity of wealthy white elites, thus maintaining the status quo.

The plays in Section 3, *The Shots Heard Round The World: Policing Black Bodies in White America*, emphasise the link between racism and policing. Overshadowing

this section are the prominent deaths of unarmed African Americans like Trayvon Martin and George Floyd. In C. A. Johnson's *The Fucking World and Everything in It*, a young black man is arrested by a police officer on suspicion fuelled by fear rather than evidence. The encounter highlights how young black men can easily find themselves in the justice system because of their race and the attendant prejudices that punish them more harshly than their white counterparts. This is illustrated when Terrance tells police officer Roberts about his life: 'I got three brothas upstate, armed robbery, two of 'em. Da other one been an addict since da day I was born. And me … my C average got me across da stage jus fine. But let's be real, all dat don't matter, do it? Not da way you looking at me' (68). The fact that Terrance has struggled to rise above his circumstances and has no criminal record is immaterial. As Officer 2 consoles the arresting officer Roberts, he tells him, 'But don't you worry about that. We'll dig up something' (69).

Black, White and Blue by Williams Watkins is set during a rehearsal of a play in which a black motorist is shot by a police officer during a traffic stop, drawing comparisons with the real-life murder of Philando Castille who was shot in his car by a police officer in 2016. In the characters' notes, Watkins describes the director as 'female, any age, not black, not white' but the voice of the character sounds white. The overall message of the piece, as in Johnson's play, is that Black people are stereotyped in fiction as well as in life with deadly consequences. The play shows how Black people are robbed of the agency to define themselves. The well-meaning director, full of artistic self-righteousness rejects the actor Jerome's request not to play the stereotype, even when he tells her that the events of the play are taken from real-life transcripts, stating that 'it's very important that we honor both of these characters' points of view', and that 'I don't believe in "bad guys" and "victims." It's lazy storytelling, know what I mean?' (73). Yet she proceeds to stereotype Jerome/Jerome's character in the most dehumanising terms (76) all in the name of art.

Jordan E. Cooper's satire *Ain't No Mo'* was developed into a full-length play which was produced at The Public in 2019. This ten-minute excerpt is set in 2009, just after Barack Obama's inauguration as the first Black president of the United States. Cooper points out that in spite of this landmark, the lives of African Americans did not change, illustrated in a roll call of violent deaths of African Americans in encounters with the police (81-2).

In Natya Bean's *Assumed Positions*, Naya becomes apprehensive after she returns from a two-year Peace Corps stint abroad to discover that her partner Matcha has joined the police: '...I ain't eem know Black folk was still signing up for the force' (88). This statement comes in the wake of the aforementioned deaths of Black people at the hands of the police. Thus, the social and political intrudes on the personal.

The writers in Section 4, 'Birth: Contemplating the Next Generation in a Complicated System', contemplate how what should be a thing of joy is cause for

apprehension and even terror. These were the hallmarks of earlier anti-lynching plays such as Angelina Weld Grimké's *Rachel* (1916) and Myrtle Smith Livingston's *For Unborn Children* (1926). In Dennis A. Allen II's *Within Untainted Wombs*, a pregnant woman is able to speak to her unborn child, Baby. Baby refuses to be born, having been traumatised by the violent deaths of black men. Allen II also references the discriminatory medical care that Black women receive. In Deneen Reynolds-Knott's *Antepartum*, Black women's solidarity through the sharing of knowledge helps prevent them from being victims of the capitalist health system that exploits them at their most vulnerable.

Bernard Tarver's *Just Another Day in the Park* is the first piece in Section 5: 'Maintaining Roots: Addressing Gentrification in Historically Black Neighbourhoods'. Sarita, a long-term resident, is accosted in the local park by white gentrifier Heather for playing her African drum. The new gentrifiers have formed a neighbourhood association without inviting the old residents. African drum playing is significant in cementing the roots and culture of the Black residents. Thus, Heather can be read as a coloniser, seeking to eradicate the indigenous culture and domesticating the space to suit herself. Her sense of entitlement is such that she even calls the police to intervene on her behalf. Cyrus Aaron's *Panopticon* is a comedy about two elderly men who are concerned about their changing neighbourhood. With humour, Aaron identifies a serious issue of how power dynamics initiate change in particular ways that are not necessarily beneficial to everyone.

The Black family is the theme of Section 6. In *Exodus* by Camille Darby, a mother and daughter try to reconcile with themselves and the past. Issues relating to the reality of their marital affairs come to the fore. Catherine, the mother, speaks to the ghost of her dead husband in a way that tells us their marriage was not always harmonious. Her daughter Janet will not allow her husband to treat her the same way as her father treated her mother, but Catherine tells her that it is the woman's role to hold the family together: 'That is your job. Do it' (127). Marcus Gardley adapts Greek myth in *The Sporting Life of Icarus Jones* to explore sexuality and masculinity through the relationship between a father and his gay son. Despite the fact Icarus Jones is comfortable in his skin, and despite his father's acceptance of him, he loses the fight against society's prejudice.

Charlie Evon Simpson's *The House* navigates the relationship between a brother and sister as they decide on what to do with their late father's house. The house, a former refuge for the enslaved, is haunted and 'filled with bad memories' that, try as much as they can, they cannot escape (142). This is because the history of the house is emblematic of the history of Black people in America. Kendra Augustin's *Sisterhood in the Time of Apocalypse* is a sci-fi piece set in the future where estranged sisters Annie and Margaret try to reconcile as the world around them implodes. As in *The House*, despite their differences, the family bond is strong enough to keep them together even in the face of annihilation. In Samantha

Godfrey's *C.O.G.s*, age, religion and region are distinguishing factors in how Black people protest injustice. Vanessa is based in New York while Auntie Kay lives in Atlanta. While they may disagree on the methods of activism, they accept that being seen and heard is vital for change to occur (157).

'Black Love: Why We Hope' is the final section of the collection. Here, the plays are either set in the past or in an imaginary landscape. For instance, Jonathan Payne's *The Weatherin'*, a ghost story about love, memory and regret, swings between 1853, 1863 and 1905 as Edgar recounts his escape from the south and his encounter with his haunted rescuer, Arnold. Angelica Chéri's *Slow Gin Fits* is set in 1945 (fictional) Chicago. Dinah is apprehensive that the much older Harold will still love her after she reveals she's had a mastectomy due to cancer that runs in the female side of her family. In Fredrica Bailey's *Love and Happiness: Ada's Story*, set in 1939, it is the female protagonist who is older than her male lover. Physical change again is the cause for concern as Ada is pregnant with Herschel's child. She ponders whether to tell him about it and even considers having an abortion. The two male protagonists of Josh Wilder's *Gravity* are made of clay. There are no names appended to the dialogue, but it is clearly two men who have just met and are learning to love each other, metaphorically and physically finding their wings to fly. In the final play, *Maya and Rivers* by Tyler English-Beckwith, we find the characters in a post-apocalyptic setting where the earth no longer supports life. People are leaving the earth in search of life elsewhere in the universe, but the success rate of the space crafts is minimal. Maya narrates her escapades on the moon with Rivers. In a world of mandatory contraception, Maya dreams of becoming a mother. But Rivers refuses to harbour even the suggestion of love in a world where it cannot be consummated, and in the end takes his chances on one of the space rockets bound for life elsewhere.

Collectively the plays paint a picture of the diverse preoccupations and the dramatic heterogeneity of contemporary African American playwrights. These plays are created in the wake of the recorded deaths of African Americans at the hands of police officers, the legacy of Barack Obama's presidency and the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement but are not exclusive responses to them. Race remains an important factor and its articulation by these writers pay homage to the past struggles whilst looking to the present and the future. White women are typified by the 'Karen' phenomenon in quite a number of these plays. Of note also is the fact that writers of African immigrant descent, Antoinette Nwandu, Jocelyn Bioh and Ngozi Anyanwu (not to mention Danai Gurira and Mfoniso Udofia who are not in this collection) are gaining prominence in American theatre, bringing a unique perspective to the table. The collection shows that despite the access to main stages by writers like Morisseau, Hall, Branden Jacobs-Jenkins and Jeremy O. Harris to name a few, there are still many more exciting, innovative and urgent voices to be heard.