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Bridge and Tunnel (review)

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residing within. Here the theatrical power resides in the brother/sister conflict and its resolution rather than the confrontation between the invisible African world of ancestor worship and ghosts set against the tangible reality of actual onstage characters.

This post-9/11 *Piano Lesson* finds its roots in the American here and now. It leaves the audience with a final image of family reconciliation and reunion, that of Maretha embracing Boy Willie. Boy Willie's consequent decision to give the piano to Berniece, if she puts it to good use, is a truly American legacy—pragmatic and optimistic. There will always be other work to do and other land to purchase, but family history shared and understood is the key to survival and celebration.

MARGARET BOOKER
Stanford University

BRIDGE AND TUNNEL. Written and performed by Sarah Jones. Directed by Tony Taccone. Berkeley Repertory Theater, Berkeley, California. 13 February 2005.

In a city like Berkeley, immigrants are easy to come by, and as Sarah Jones, dressed as an old homeless woman named “Miss Lady,” urged theatergoers to keep an open mind and turn off their cell phones, she was greeted with nods and smiles. In her one-woman show *Bridge and Tunnel*, Jones performs a series of character monologues meant to represent a cross section of New York's immigrant population. Jones switches characters by changing into sets of clothing hung on brightly-colored set pieces. The premise of *Bridge and Tunnel* is a poetry reading; onstage a sign reads “I. A. M. A. P.O.E.T. T.O.O.,” an acronym that stands for “Immigrant and Multi-culturalist American Poets or Enthusiasts Traveling Toward Optimistic Openness.” In *Bridge and Tunnel* Jones personifies the many immigrants of different ages, races, ethnicities, and sexes who meet annually to share their cross-cultural love of poetry.

The play runs ninety minutes without an intermission, and in order to connect the various monologues Jones embodies a Pakistani master of ceremonies humorously named Muhammad Ali. Ali's monologues introduce the other characters but also gesture to the play's post-9/11 subtext: before the poetry reading commences, *Bridge and Tunnel's* audience overhears Ali on the phone with his wife discussing a pending investigation by the Department of Homeland Security. The character's cheer-

ful attitude is a tribute to immigrants who flourish in spite of America's ambivalence and suspicion toward its newest arrivals.

Throughout *Bridge and Tunnel* Jones addresses how American perceptions of immigrants differ based on country of origin, class, and religious practices. One character, a man in a wheelchair named Juan José, tells a story about the poverty that forces him to leave Mexico and the tragic border crossing that kills his lover. His tale quiets the audience, while an Australian woman's searing poem about an ex-lover solicits raucous laughter. Jones also performs the part of a Jordanian woman named Habiba who wears a head covering. Habiba tells an unexpectedly lighthearted story about her childhood spent listening to the Beatles and writing love poetry to a boy next door. Jones brings the characters' seemingly unrelated stories into conversation with one another and challenges the audience to find connections. By juxtaposing unlike stories, she also highlights the breadth of American immigrant experiences. “Bridge and Tunnel” is a pejorative term sometimes used to describe immigrant neighborhoods in New York; Jones appropriates the expression to address the ways that immigrants are not only connected through the hope that they find in America, but also through American anger and fear regarding cultural difference.

Most of the monologues have an explicitly progressive message of racial equality and cultural tolerance. As an actress and writer following in the footsteps of Anna Deavere Smith, Jones also interviews people in order to create characters, listening to their words and intonation. Smith became famous by conversing with people after tragedies like the LA riots and reconstructing their interviews verbatim for the stage; Jones crafts her own monologues and invents the “Bridge and Tunnel Café” in order to bring her characters' lives together. Acting the part of a Vietnamese slam poet, Jones sharply criticizes the stereotype of the “Model Minority” that obscures the different ethnicities and experiences designated by the term “Asian.” Playing a Jamaican actress, Jones quips that the two opportunities that America provides for Jamaican immigrants are becoming Secretary of State or taking care of children, two names for the same job. Both of these monologues resist the limitations that American expectations put on immigrant lives and identities, and each reflects Jones's desire to put different perspectives on stage.

Though the presentation of such a variety of immigrant experiences is noteworthy, Jones's ability to disguise her own racial and sexual identity while performing each character is no less so. As a



Sarah Jones as a homeless woman named "Miss Lady," at the Berkeley Repertory Theater.
Photo: Brian Michael Thomas.

woman of color with dark skin and a noticeably female physical build, her ability to perform different races and genders supports the claim that both race and gender are performative. Yet Jones's characters discuss how traits such as skin color and accents limit opportunities for immigrant populations. *Bridge and Tunnel* allows the artist to explore the possibilities within her own identity on stage without trivializing the lived experience of racial and ethnic identity in America at large.

Bridge and Tunnel allows the artist to emphasize how poetry and language remain useful means of sharing life experiences and to draw support from a sympathetic audience; the "I am a Poet Too" gathering serves as an imaginary safe place for immigrants to share their disappointments. Jones simultaneously attempts to use the tools of the spoken word to challenge *Bridge and Tunnel's* audience's worldviews and to give faces to the caricatures of immigrant difference. Yet, the play ends without a call to action or a challenge to the mores of the audience members—Muhammad Ali thanks the last of the poets and welcomes his fellow immigrants to a multicultural potluck upstairs. Jones's immigrants and their poignant stories fade as the house lights come up on a hundred colorful bodies in the Berkeley theatre.

CHRISTINA KNIGHT
Stanford University

FLIGHT. By Charlayne Woodard. Directed by Robert Egan. Kirk Douglas Theatre, Culver City, California. 16 January–13 February 2005.

The premiere production of Charlayne Woodard's *Flight* animates narratives about life on slave plantations. Drama, storytelling, song, dance, and drums re-enact the interconnectedness between the African ritual and the African-American slave experience. Set in a plantation in Georgia in 1858, *Flight* develops as an enchanting performance suitable for an audience of all ages and races. The production begins with an intensely poignant scene in which an enslaved husband learns that his wife has just been sold by their owners to another plantation, then joins the rest of the slave community in comforting his five-year-old son. Weaving together the didacticism inherent in the African oral tradition of storytelling and the African-American theatre apparatus, the performance cultivates inspiration, hope, and healing in the characters and the audience. The slave community in *Flight* was shaped by a history of shared experiences and memories,

merging private trauma with public healing to propose collective historical memory as a political possibility.

Dedicated to the memory of Dr. Beverley Robinson, the late Professor of Folklore and Theater at UCLA, *Flight* illustrates Charlayne Woodard's magnificent innovativeness and imagination. The concern of the performance seemed not so much to re-enact the atrocities of slavery but to theatricalize the need to overcome the trauma of the violence incurred. Woodard's deployment of the rich and controlling metaphor of flying was brilliantly portrayed by five actors who exhibited extraordinary inventive performance styles. Tropes of courage, determination, and hope proliferated as each narrator-performer dramatized his or her favorite folk tale and linked it to everyday experiences on the plantation. The character Oh Beah (Myra Lucretia Taylor) explains, "There was a time when our people in Africa could fly. And they did. They flew free as eagles. Over the mountains, over the forests and over the waterfalls. Just a riding on the wind. Of course, anybody can fly if their spirit is free." The flight depicted seems metonymic, evoking tropes of freedom, wit, magic, and festivity.

Flight comprises a series of short narrative episodes in which visual and aural elements weave together into the set, costume, and lighting designs to create an atmosphere depicting melancholy and hope. The minimal stage set features a centrally located fireplace and strategically placed gigantic logs and shrubs to leave an open spatiality referencing an African realism. Women in long dresses and headscarves and men in faded, torn clothes evoked the harshness of slavery. The plot elements and forms of narration were borrowed from African oral traditions, as performers recast themselves in the character roles of the folk narratives, and surrogate traditional African griots and praise singers. Everything was accompanied by drumming and percussions, with some occasional solo and group singing. The choreographic imaginations of Otis Sallid crystallized the essence of flying as the actors juxtaposed the movement within the confined space of slavery on the plantation, and by extension that of the theatrical space, vis-à-vis the free-flowing space of Africa and the space for a storytelling performance. The performance of *Flight* thus created an emblem of confinement, ironically enabling the same apparatuses to discipline the characters into creating a space for resistance and survival, much like the trickster figures in the oral traditions of Africa. In this way, the power of embodied memory and storytelling was restored to Africa.