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# Profile 9: 'Tickling the Balls of God': Suzan-Lori Parks and her Many Creative Acts

Steven Leigh Morris

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COLUMBIA COLLEGE CHICAGO



DEMOCRATIC VISTAS PROFILES

**'TICKLING THE BALLS OF GOD'**  
SUZAN-LORI PARKS AND HER MANY CREATIVE ACTS

By Steven Leigh Morris

NUMBER  
**09**

**CENTER FOR ARTS POLICY**  
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DEMOCRATIC VISTAS PROFILES

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DEMOCRATIC VISTAS PROFILES

## ‘TICKLING THE BALLS OF GOD’ SUZAN-LORI PARKS AND HER MANY CREATIVE ACTS

By Steven Leigh Morris

**IN NOVEMBER 2002, PLAYWRIGHT SUZAN-LORI PARKS DECIDED TO WRITE A SHORT PLAY, EVERY DAY, FOR A YEAR.**

That’s 365 plays over 365 days, writing as an act of daily prayer “to the process of making art . . . and of being alive,” she told *The New Yorker*. When she made that decision, she didn’t have a larger aim in mind, she says—such as seeing those plays produced. The scheme for producing the hundreds

of playlets came much later in conjunction with her creative partner, Bonnie Metzgar. For Parks, the completion of a play is its own accomplishment—whether it be her full-length, 2002 Pulitzer Prize winner *Topdog/Underdog*, or a four-to-ten-minute Buddhist sketch, the kind that make up most of the plays in what would later be called the 365 Days/365 Plays project.

“I don’t buy into the rap that plays aren’t fully realized until they’re performed,” she says while sipping tea at The Cow’s End, her favorite coffee-bar/community center in Venice, California. “I say they’re fully realized once I write them down. Just because we live in a material world, we think we have to make [written plays] material, but they’re there. Of course, they’re there. So the idea that playwrights aren’t successful unless they’re performed keeps a lot of people down.”

Until one day months after having completed the 365th play, when Parks was in Denver riding shotgun in a jeep with Metzgar, she had no plan to get her 365 plays produced. They had been sitting virtually unread, and Parks says she was just fine with that, busy with other projects.

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“In the early days, I didn’t get done at the Mark Taper Forum, but I didn’t mind,” Parks explains.

It was on that jeep that Metzgar and Parks hatched the idea to get all the plays produced.

It’s now November 9, 2006, four days before the 365 Days/365 Plays project launch at New York’s Public Theater. Her 365 plays are about to be performed through

## THE UNIFYING FORCE OF 365 DAYS/365 PLAYS IS THE SURREALISTIC HISTORICAL VISION OF ONE ÜBERPLAYWRIGHT.

the next twelve months, week-by-week in the same sequence they were written, in over 5,000 productions, simultaneously in fifteen cities (or regions), across America, plus a few presentations in Canada, Britain, Australia and China. Like *The Lysistrata Project*, an explosion of readings and workshops of the anti-war classic, presented simultaneously across the globe during the build-up to the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq, 365 Days/365 Plays is largely organized online, centrally coordinated from a hub in each city or region. But rather than being fueled by the political indignation around one superpower’s inexorable march to war, the unifying force here is the surrealistic historical vision of one überplaywright.

This has been a source of inspiration, amazement and some consternation. As one skeptical BBC News interviewer asked Parks, “And what exactly is the point of all this?”

“What a fucking stupid question,” Parks bristles. “Of course I didn’t tell him that. I told him I don’t know what the point of my own project is. I hope he was smart enough to catch the sarcasm, but I doubt it. It’s obvious the man never wrote anything creative. If I asked myself ‘What’s the point of all this?’ I’d never have written a single play.”

The interviewer, however, raised a cynical implication that’s been expressed in hushed whispers at theater parties across the country by people who may be jealous, justified, or both—that 365 Days/365 Plays is the largest self-promotion gimmick in the history of the American

theater, attended by one of the most dazzling publicity blitzes for a single dramatist in recent memory. A cover story in *American Theatre* magazine (administered by Theatre Communications Group, which simultaneously published, in book form, the entire collection of Parks’ 365 plays) was accompanied by prominent feature articles in the *New Yorker*, *Variety*, *L.A. Stage* and newspaper coverage in dozens of metropolitan dailies, including of course, the *New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Boston Globe*, and *Chicago Tribune*, plus radio interviews from NPR to

the BBC.

How does one gauge the sincerity of a playwright who claims not to care that much about productions, then concocts a scheme to land over 5,000 of them in a single year? When a tree falls in the forest and *everybody* hears it, questions of metaphysics yield to questions of motive.

Only someone with a combination of Parks’ idiosyncratic mind, her MacArthur (“Genius”) Fellowship, and a Pulitzer Prize has the authority to stand at the center of such an ambitious national outreach effort.

A more sympathetic BBC interviewer, Gabriel Gbadamosi, spoke with Parks the same morning that 365 Days/365 Plays launched at the Public. Parks sat wearing headphones—eyes closed, listening intently—by a microphone in a New York radio studio rented by the BBC. Metzgar stood by a wall watching Parks field polite

## HOW DOES ONE GAUGE THE SINCERITY OF A PLAYWRIGHT WHO CLAIMS NOT TO CARE THAT MUCH ABOUT PRODUCTIONS, THEN CONCOCTS A SCHEME TO LAND OVER 5,000 OF THEM IN A SINGLE YEAR?

inquiries from Gbadamosi in London, for BBC’s Radio 3 culture program, *Night Waves*.

Gbadamosi asked Parks how she found the inspiration to come up with a new play *every day*.

Sometimes no ideas would come, Parks explained, and that absence would be the source material for the play, *Going Through the Motions*. Sitting on the swivel-

chair, eyes still closed, arms extended, palms to the ceiling, Parks wiggles her fingers:

“Sometimes I’d have to tickle the balls of God, and ask, ‘What’s next?’” After a pause, she adds in the same dreamy tone, “You’re probably going to have to edit that out.”

Gbadamosi is collapsing with laughter on another continent: “Oh, if only we didn’t have to.”

He then sums up the dueling perceptions of Parks’ motives in a poignant question: “Have you mastered the art of success by trading in on your name? Or is this your response, your gift, in return for that Pulitzer moment?”

Will the real Suzan–Lori Parks please stand up?

## NOW 43, PARKS IS A STRIKING AND REGAL AFRICAN-AMERICAN WOMAN WITH A LITERARY HERITAGE,

thick braids and wide nose, who speaks in girlish, sometimes squeaky Valley-girl cadences (being a military brat, she grew up in many corners of America, but not the valleys of California). Since buying a beachfront home in Venice with her blues musician husband, Paul Oscher, Parks has tried her hands (and feet) at surfing. In 2003, she had the “T” of a surfboard taped onto the hardwood floor of her upstairs den, where she could practice. She spoke then about the relationship between surfing and transcendental meditation. Eventually, however, she became worn out by the ritual of cleaning the sand out of her braids. And now that she has withdrawn somewhat from the sea, she’s also planning her departure from the West Coast. Last year, she purchased a house in Syracuse, New York, where she has said she eventually plans on moving, to be near her sister and her mother.

She came to Los Angeles to teach playwriting at

reason Parks wanted the cat.

Parks is emotionally gregarious and generous, quick to embrace, to console and support. When I last met up with her, she was working on a commissioned musical adaptation of the movie *Ray* (about Ray Charles) and

**“SOMETIMES I’D HAVE TO TICKLE THE BALLS OF GOD, AND ASK, ‘WHAT’S NEXT?’” AFTER A PAUSE, PARKS ADDS IN THE SAME DREAMY TONE, “YOU’RE PROBABLY GOING TO HAVE TO EDIT THAT OUT.”**

learning to ride a Suzuki 650 motorcycle, “a respectable girl’s bike.”

“I went to this cool-woman California Motorcycle School. These two chicks, Amanda and somebody. I learned on this parking lot on Wilshire.”

The house is often cluttered with music equipment. Parks wrote and sang her own songs for a recording of her Faulkner-esque first novel, *Getting Mother’s Body*, published in 2003. In her upstairs study, besides shelves of books, there’s a large map of Texas (where her mother was born), photos of William Faulkner, August Wilson, and Albert Einstein, plus a telegram from Columbia University that she shows with giddy delight: “Congratulations. You have just won the Pulitzer Prize.”

Though owning the most coveted drama award in America, Parks hardly has an insatiable appetite for live theater (though she’s certainly not averse to it). It’s when reading Shakespeare or Wilson, she says, that the plays come to life in her mind and she can relish and savor the glorious sounds of a phrase, or even a word. There’s something vaguely Platonic in this distrust of live performance. The actors and their speechifying contained within the lighting plot of a production’s razzle-dazzle

## PARKS SAYS IT’S BESIDE THE POINT WHETHER HER PLAYS ARE OUT IN THE WORLD OR IN A DRAWER.

CalArts in Valencia, a job she’s since replaced with giving lectures across the country and writing for film. Also in the family are three rescued animals: two pit bulls, Lambchop and Boogie–Woogie; and a cat named Hounddog who has twenty-one toes. The extra digit was the

are mere shadows on the cave wall. The imaginative reader might conjure deeper truths by inventing a play’s faces, and the gestures of its characters, simply by decoding language, by reading into the signposts of the drama. Parks says it’s beside the point whether her plays are out

in the world or in a drawer.

As you might be able to tell from her Zen-like belief in the reality of abstraction, and the concreteness of literature, Parks is a Buddhist of a sort—at least a devotee of Buddha, she says, as she is also of Christ and Gandhi. She practices Ashtanga yoga and sports a Sanskrit bracelet-tattoo on her wrist. It says, *ish vara prani denani var*. Loosely translated, that means “Follow God, the inner guide.”

“Maybe it really says ‘Mom,’” she quips in her study. “Same thing really.”

She believes that accomplishment, for a writer, comes from the purity and discipline of the search for some truth about life and death, the quality of the dots on the page that now exist where before they didn’t. Some of Parks’ 365 plays were written in airport terminals, most at home, sometimes inspired by historical figures whose birthdays or death days may have coincided with the day on which she was writing. Johnny Cash and Carol Shields each have their play. Abraham Lincoln has several. Lincoln also showed up in her earlier, full-length works—*The America Play* and *Topdog/Underdog*—as an African-American carnival performer posing as Lincoln for the purpose of getting shot, hour after hour, by a parade of customers who pay pennies to impersonate Edwin Booth assassinating the president while he watches a play.

Other plays have even unlikelier geneses. In 2003, for example, when I came to interview Parks at her home about a local production of *In the Blood*, one of her two riffs on Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* (the other is named *Fucking A*), the young female publicist who’d set up the interview, who was also the show’s director, showed up wanting to sit in, uninvited, on our conversation. Parks found the young woman’s request to be presumptuous and asked her to leave (despite the prodigious quantities of publicity that Parks has attracted, she’s a strict guardian of her privacy and enforcer of public relations protocol). The awkwardness got everyone slightly flustered, and the circumstances surrounding that prickly exchange became the subject for that day’s play.

Sitting cross-legged on a chair in her study, Parks describes it:

“This writer and this woman are in the house. The writer says, ‘Who are you?’ The woman says, ‘I’m a fan.’ ‘Why are you in my house?’ ‘Because I’m a fan.’ ‘But I don’t know you.’ Then a whole bunch of slaves run across the stage. ‘What’s that?’ the woman says. ‘They’re running free.’ ‘Can I run with them?’ ‘Be my guest.’”

## THE BEAUTY OF THE PROJECT, PARKS SAYS, IS THAT FIFTY-TWO THEATERS

(sometimes more) per city, or region, each volunteers to participate for one week, and nobody is excluded, nobody is told how to produce the plays. Once a theater signs on, it is assigned seven plays based on what week it’s been delegated to perform them. Each week, the torch—and the light that comes with it—gets handed to a different theater in a given city or region. The attention and the power and the responsibility lie entirely with each theater. The only qualifications for a theater to participate are proof of its existence and a commitment to perform the words as Parks wrote them.

“We’re not creating communities,” Parks told Gbadamosi. “We’re revealing communities where they already exist.”

Though the coordination may be centralized, the creative energy is entirely local—the casting, staging, the set, the costumes, whether to present one play on each day of the week, or all the seven plays on one night only, on any combination in between. The actors don’t have to speak English, if they’re in, say, a Spanish or Filipino or Armenian district. They can translate them to the locally used language, providing the translation is true to the spirit and literary rhythms of Parks’ original. They can play in a community center or a library or a church or a mall. How the productions actually come off, Parks says, is beside the point, which is an experiment in the democratization of an elitist art form.

## THOUGH PARKS UNDERSTANDS THE UNDERLYING EFFICIENCY

of most theaters being administered as “a collaborative dictatorship,” that kind of hierarchy also locks out creative possibilities. To open up artistic decisions regarding her plays, and the responsibilities that come with them, to hundreds of unknown directors and ensembles in the hinterlands is the core of Parks’ experiment.

“Democracy is terrifying,” Parks says. “To give [everyone] a vote is terrifying. They may be knuckleheads.”

“I don’t have to get them to weigh in,” Parks explains, “but that’s where the miracles happen. They have to step up to a certain level of excellence. ‘Oh, I’m invited to the table, me with my budget of \$5 a year’—then



they rise.”

Conceptually, Parks sees her artistic experiment as an allegory for contemporary world politics: “[President] Bush is like saying, ‘I have the say, why should I ask people’s opinion who disagree with me?’ And that’s where the whole thing dies.”

## “I’M NOT TRIPPIN’ ON MYSELF WHEN I SAY THIS IS LIKE GOD AND THE WORLD.

[I] get to say, ‘I’m going to make this thing and I’m going to allow you guys to do your thing, so I may know you’—Who said that, Emerson or Thoreau?—I’m not interested in the fruits of the labor, will it get a great review in the *Times*? There’s another value

## “DEMOCRACY IS TERRIFYING,” PARKS SAYS. “TO GIVE [EVERYONE] A VOTE IS TERRIFYING. THEY MAY BE KNUCKLEHEADS.”

system in place.”

One Los Angeles theater producer, who wished to remain off the record, disagrees. Her theater agreed to participate in *365 Days/365 Plays*, but reluctantly. Her remarks revealed a low-level resentment that her theater’s time and labor should be expended on one playwright’s “self-promotion campaign.” The core of the complaint, however, was that of a fundamental contradiction between the project’s stated ideal and its manifestation: “How can [Parks and Metzgar] talk about the democratization of art, then ask theaters to commit to produce seven plays that they’ve been assigned, without even being allowed to read them before making that commitment? That doesn’t sound like ‘grass roots’ to me.”

Could it be that Parks landed 5,000 productions in a single year not just because her mind and her priorities float somewhere beyond the expected, but because she and Metzgar came up with both the credentials and the scheme to *assign* theaters to do them? Maybe, but no theater was forced to participate, and no theater was turned away. *365 Days/365 Plays* still reframes the hierarchies of theater, and revisits the questions of what and whom theater is for, and how it can be done. Of course any challenge to the way things are normally done is going to garner both attention and hostility. It’s not as though she’s making any money from the project. With a licensing fee of \$1 for each play and a ceaseless fundraising

campaign, she and Metzgar will be lucky if the project breaks even.

## SUZAN-LORI PARKS WAS BORN IN KENTUCKY

to Donald and Francis McMillan Parks and raised Catholic (“not a lot of black Catholics,” she notes). Her father was in an armored division of the U.S. Army, so the three Parks kids—Suzan-Lori, her older sister Stephanie, and brother Buddy—moved almost every year, from North Carolina to Texas to Vermont. Her parents loved literature, and weaned their children on it. Stephanie Parks remembers that whenever they moved into a new town, the first things their parents taught them was how to find the library.

Stephanie, now in marketing, says her sister was al-

ways outgoing, with a large group of friends. Because Stephanie is three years older, her social circle didn’t intersect with Suzan-Lori’s much.

“My sister was always driven,” Stephanie recalls. “We both did track and field. I was the sprinter. Suzan-Lori was the long-distance runner. She was focused on what she chose to do. If it was science or math, she was focused. If she had a book, she wanted to finish it. She wouldn’t rest until she’d finished it.”

During a year in the 1970s when their father was stationed in Germany, Stephanie, as a high-schooler, was assigned to an American school, but absorbed German nonetheless. Suzan-Lori, however, also speaking not a word of German, was dunked into a German-language junior high school. She flourished.

“I was failing my classes, then the language came in through my sinuses,” Suzan-Lori explains, and I felt, like—*wow*. I was fluent when I got out.”

Parks’ early works pivot on the density of their language, and the way it breathes, even if that language is homegrown from the memories and cadences of her family.

She majored in English and German literature at Mt. Holyoke College, from where she graduated in 1985, and never used German again. It was also at Mt. Holyoke that she studied writing with James Baldwin.



“The thing about James Baldwin,” Parks says, squinting into the sun from the patio in her front garden, “is that he wanted people to call him ‘Jimmy.’ Most of the people in the class did that, except me. My parents gave me his books when I was growing up, so ‘Mr. James Baldwin’ was never ‘Jimmy’ for me. Back in the day, adults were adults. We weren’t raised to call adults by their first name, and to drink with ‘Mr. James Baldwin.’”

Once, after reading Parks’ extended passages of dialogue in a piece of fiction she’d turned in, Baldwin said, “Ms. Parks, have you ever considered writing for the theater?”

“That day, I ran home and wrote a play.”

The same stern protocol she had shown in evicting an uninvited publicist from her home in the context of an interview, that formal adherence to roles, had guided her relationship between herself as a student and the teacher she so emulated.

“So when [Baldwin] died, it was a scene. I was really sad. I wasn’t his friend, I was his student, and I was lucky to get into his class.”

When she started to carve out a writing career in New York in the late 1980s, her earliest supporters were

*Funk*). After producing *The America Play*, Wolfe told her that if she would take the same core ideas and simplify them, she could be the first African-American woman to win the Pulitzer Prize.

The play contains an Act 1 carnival where customers pay to shoot blanks at a black man playing Abraham Lincoln. Act 2 is a Beckettian purgatory populated by a black family searching for its patriarch (and heritage). Wolfe suggested that Parks trim the two locales to one, to the carnival. Pulitzer committees tend to favor neither dreamscapes nor complexity, Wolfe urged. They’re not poetically inclined. They’re a literal bunch. They’re journalists.

Parks attended a recent performance of *The America Play* at the Theatre @ Boston Court in Pasadena, and agreed to participate in a post-performance discussion. One exchange with an audience member revealed how unnerved some get by what they perceive as Parks’ foreign theatrical language—the replacement of a central dramatic action with a collage of symbols and metaphors. For example, how the man playing Lincoln in the Act 1 carnival disappeared for most of Act 2, while his family searched for him in a desert, sometimes eating Chinese food on a blanket, between bouts of digging in the sand.

## AFTER PRODUCING *THE AMERICA PLAY*, GEORGE C. WOLFE TOLD HER THAT IF SHE WOULD TAKE THE SAME CORE IDEAS AND SIMPLIFY THEM, SHE COULD BE THE FIRST AFRICAN-AMERICAN WOMAN TO WIN THE PULITZER PRIZE.

the *Village Voice*’s Alisa Solomon and wordsmith-playwright Mac Wellman, who quickly recognized how the vivid, cogent alternative worlds of Parks’ language-driven dreamscapes homed in on images of racism. These works blended urbanity with a kaleidoscope of European and American literary influences, from Hochdeutch to Faulkner to Greek mythology to Baldwin. In 1989, the *New York Times* named her “most promising playwright.” Tony Kushner also weighed in early as a Parks fan.

In 1991, she was invited to be an associate artist at Yale University, by which time George C. Wolfe had become Parks’ mentor. Wolfe, a gay African-American man, was then artistic director of the Public Theater and known for his showmanship in transferring black history and dance to the Broadway stage (in shows ranging from *The Colored Museum* to *Bring in ‘Da Noise, Bring in ‘Da*

The encounter went something like this:

*Parks:* You can hear these same conversations around the kitchen tables and porches of my family.

*Audience member:* I was baffled. The second act, in that desert, could have been a completely different play.

*Parks:* Are you—do you have a family tree?

*Audience:* No. I’m trying to understand your play.

*Parks:* The play is about space and time.

*Audience:* You took us on ride of a different nature.

*Parks:* I was trying to do my job.

*Audience:* This man, this Abraham Lincoln impersonator, did not have much of a connection to his family. And in

Act 2, they're all looking for him. Why?

*Parks:* Listening and digging. Listening and digging. It's the creative process. Sometimes you don't want to hear what comes in. Sometimes you just want to fake it. They're all looking for each other in the wrong place. He comes back to them and they find each other in this hole of history. Time is not an orderly progression of events. It's actually more kaleidoscopic and confusing.

*Audience:* Don't you feel some obligation to your audience?

*Parks:* I feel 100% obligation to my characters. I feel the artist should lead. Dig, dig, dig. Listen, listen, listen.

## IT WAS AS IF A CIRCLE AND STRAIGHT LINE WERE ARGUING

over which represented a truer and more authentic depiction of life's journey. The audience member, or the Line, argued that the writer's responsibility is to show the relationships among a sequence of events, a progression that corresponds to the way we record the days and the decades. The Circle, however, grew up living in towns across America, even overseas, at the whim of the United States government. There was no sequential pattern to the order of towns she and her kin lived in. In each place, she had to use her wits to create meaning from random circumstances. She learned German by listening. She had to, or she would fail in school. She obtained truth by digging, listening, using whatever nuggets she unearthed. She learned history by reading. Truth revealed itself to her though a "kaleidoscopic" flow of time that Parks speaks about, and writes about. Grabbing at truths when they appear, and keeping oneself prepared to receive them.

Eventually however, in *Topdog/Underdog*, Parks followed Wolfe's advice, entirely dropping the no-man's land of *The America Play* and extending the carnival farce into a more traditional, linear rivalry between two brothers. Wolfe's prediction of the Pulitzer was on target.

## IN JANUARY, 2005, MICHAEL RITCHIE TOOK OVER FROM GORDON DAVIDSON

as artistic director of Center Theatre Group, Los Angeles' largest producing organization that, in conjunction with the county, administers three mid-size theaters: the intimate Mark Taper Forum (considered by many as Los Angeles' jewel in the crown of elite theaters), the

Ahmanson Theater (used largely as a booking house), and the Kirk Douglas Theater (which Davidson added to CTG's stable for the purpose of developing new work).

Among Ritchie's first acts was dismantling four minority playwriting laboratories housed at the Mark Taper Forum: the Latino Theatre Initiative, the Asian Theatre Workshop, the Blacksmyth Theater Lab (for African-American playwrights), and a laboratory for disabled writers called Other Voices. The labs were the legacy of the era of identity politics. Established by Davidson (who'd been at the Taper's helm since 1967), they had tried for a kind of affirmative action for playwrights by attempting to address the paradox of living in a city where Caucasians dominated the theater, both as artists and audiences, while being a statistical minority of the local population. Davidson had imagined he was investing in a melting-pot future for the Taper.

A generation later, Ritchie waltzed in from the Williamstown Theatre Festival in Massachusetts and shut down these programs. He said his job was to fill three theaters with product, and the labs weren't delivering the goods. They were serving more as discussion groups. There are more efficient ways of getting ethnic voices onto the stage, Ritchie argued. Critics responded with an onslaught of hostile press, capped by an eviscerating editorial by the *New York Times* drama critic, Margo Jefferson. It was called "Slow Fade to White."

Suzan-Lori Parks, however, is a Michael Ritchie defender. And the way she defends him identifies her with a generation of ethnic writers who don't wish to be patronized, however well meaning their patrons may be. They'd rather rise on their own terms, which is easier to say than to do in a field of scant opportunities.

"I don't want to be in a playwriting group with a bunch of black folks," she told me. "Fuck, how interesting is that? I don't want to join the ghetto. So Michael Ritchie tore down the window dressing, but he didn't have a plan to replace it. He didn't spin it. He needs an ambassador. Michael Ritchie was one of the first people who said that 365 Days/365 Plays is a great idea. Now we're under his 501(c)(3) [nonprofit status] umbrella, which is huge."

Though Parks handles herself gracefully when challenged—as the give-and-take with the perplexed audience member in Pasadena showed—she has little patience for people who question either her craft or the motives behind projects like 365 Days/365 Plays. Upon a return visit to The Cow's End, I point out that the project, and

its scope, has generated pockets of resentment. Parks is agitated by the remarks, but not surprised. She's been spat at before, literally, just for standing on a street. Those are the kinds of gestures that inspired the Taper's minority labs, patronizing as they may have been. The paradox of rising on your own terms is that you're on your own,

## THOUGH PARKS HANDLES HERSELF GRACEFULLY WHEN CHALLENGED, SHE HAS LITTLE PATIENCE FOR PEOPLE WHO QUESTION EITHER HER CRAFT OR THE MOTIVES BEHIND PROJECTS LIKE 365 DAYS/365 PLAYS.

in a game that's been rigged for centuries. Shortly after the tragedy of 9/11, when America still held the world's heart in its hands, Parks was traveling in Canada. She says for a fleeting moment in history, she was seen not as a "sistah," but as an American. She felt it, like a snowflake that she relished. It soon melted.

"If you go to most people and say, 'How do you feel about our city doing a black woman's diary for a year?' they'll say, 'Tell me how quickly I can kill you.' If David Mamet had come up with this idea, do you think there

## BACK IN HER GARDEN, ONE OF PARKS' PIT BULLS BARKS FEROCIOUSLY... "I WANTED TO HAVE A DOG THAT REQUIRES A HIGH LEVEL OF EXCELLENCE IN THE OWNER."

would be the same kind of resentment? . . . That's part of what's going on here."

What's going on here, Parks says, is old-fashioned bigotry, subterranean and relentless.

"I'm the first black woman to win the Pulitzer Prize [in Drama], but I'm certainly not the first great African-American playwright. Look at *Raisin in the Sun*. Along with the basic, gee-whiz, he/she's doing it and I'm not, it is exacerbated by race and gender—let's not pretend that doesn't influence the equation. That's been from the first play I ever wrote. They're either with you or they're standing there folding their arms and saying, 'Who does she think she is?'"

Here, explanation yields to indignation.

"I'm used to it. I don't care. People do the same thing with Oprah. People are not accustomed to seeing the work of women of color as being relevant to them. Let's be real about it. These are rules that somebody made up to keep somebody else down. We can speak intel-

ligently about it, but as we would say on the corner, 'Fuck 'em, anyway.'" Back in her garden, one of Parks' pit bulls barks ferociously as a neighbor passes behind the

tall slatted-wood fence that separates her courtyard from a public walkway. The dog is protecting the perimeter, a daunting security system.

"I wanted to have a dog that requires a high level of excellence in the owner. You have to be responsible. You have to socialize the dog—see how he just licked your hand—he requires me to be on my best game, which is how I want to be."

Parks lives in a beautiful house, and the need for security is real. But the rationalization for owning a famously vicious breed of dog (to keep one's personal responsibility at its peak) speaks to the fascinating and contradictory elements rattling around in her soul—the pride, the fear, the anger, the drive and the love.

"When I was little, my parents always told me, 'You are an ambassador for your race.' It's the same with pit bulls, you have to be their ambassador. They get a lot of

bad press because they're strong, they're tough. They're also loveable but they get bad press, just like black folks."

## ON THE MORNING OF NOVEMBER 13, 2006,

a cab whisks Parks, her press attaché, and the project's archivist to the Public Theater for a morning tech rehearsal of the theater's project launch. The first seven plays will be presented, directed by Michael Greif, a veteran director in both New York and numerous regional theaters. There will be a run-through in the afternoon, and then two performances in the evening,

with book-signings after each. Parks worries that Greif's approach may be too cinema verité, too earth-bound.

"Global note for Michael," Parks says in the cab, "Don't Steppenwolf it [a reference to Chicago's Steppenwolf Theatre, known for its gritty realism]. These plays are mythic, not naturalistic."

There's organized chaos in the Public's large Newman Theater as Greif, dressed all in black, drolly dispenses instructions to technicians, actors and the piano accompanist. Parks scrambles down the raked audience bleachers to whisper her "global note" in Greif's ear.

A community theater in Boise, Idaho, can do what-

hours is anybody's guess.

Later in the rehearsal, the pianist Friedman calls out, "I hate what I'm doing with this thing."

Replies Greif in the same, studied tone, "Then do something else."

Early that afternoon, in the theater's upstairs offices, the staff is in a dither. A truckload of anthologies for the book-signings left the printer in Jamaica, Queens, four hours ago and still has not arrived in the East Village. The truck is stuck in a tunnel.

The lobby is packed with delegates from the fifty-two participating theaters in the New York circuit, of

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ever it wishes with Parks' plays, but not the New York Public on opening day. Parks is there with her sleeves rolled up, pitching in. Democracy can wait a week. Today, Parks wants it done her way.

"Well, yeah, that's really about the size of the theater," Greif intones. "I will bring that up with them," he says softly before shouting out to the backstage actors, "We're missing a couple of the costumes because Emilio's still working on them!"

Parks now sidles to me, further up in the hall: "I've never had a play in the Newman, so I'm feeling pretty big today. This is where all the big plays happen."

A black proscenium curtain hides all but one sliver of the stage for the first playlet, *Start Here*, which introduces Arguna and Krisha (played by Rachael Holmes and Jojo Gonzales, in mythic Indian attire). Krisha's about to embark on a huge journey, and the sketch is entirely about that embarking. Pianist Michael Friedman cuts off his moody accompaniment and the lights come up, sort of, and then they go down again. Woops.

"Okay, okay," Greif, calls out with a years-learned tone of support mixed with fatigue. "It's all good. Let's take it back, please. All good. Tony, you need to play the sound cue. Tony? Are you going to do that for me? And the fade was abrupt and terrible."

The entire presentation will last just over an hour. But how this is going to come together in the next four

which the Public Theater is the hub. Everybody in the lobby introduces themselves and their affiliation. Artistic director Oskar Eustis gives a welcoming keynote, during which the books arrive. In an anteroom off the lobby, Parks effervesces: "You see! You see! Usually there's the in-crowd and everybody else leaning against a back wall *wishing* they were in. But here, *everybody's* in—and nothing is diminished by it."

The technical precision of the first evening performance is miraculous, given the chaos only hours earlier. The lighting fades are no longer "abrupt and terrible," the sound cues are pitch perfect and the actors are working in a style that fits the hall, while honoring the size of Parks' ideas.

In *The Window of Opportunity*, a French gendarme (Joon MacIntosh) stands at attention guarding a suspended window that's decorated with frills and lace, as though from some country cottage kitchen. The Window Meister slides the pane up and announces, with overblown ceremony, "The window of opportunity is now open." Quite a bit of time goes by—a minute or so of our time representing a large chunk of world and American history, according to a narrator—before the Meister decorously shuts the window, just as The One Who Got Away (André Holland) rushes in to face the barricade.

This is pure whimsy laced with fury, or fury laced with whimsy, depending on how it's interpreted, but the

## SHE BELIEVES THAT WHEN GIVEN A WINDOW OF OPPORTUNITY, OR, AS SHE PUTS IT, “A SEAT AT THE TABLE,” LESSER-KNOWN PEOPLE AND LESSER-KNOWN THEATERS SOMETIMES RISE TO LEVELS THAT NOBODY BEFORE HAD IMAGINED.

play is typical of Parks’ deceptively lighthearted approach to the art of writing, which is really a combination of craft and quest. *The Window of Opportunity* is an emblem of many things—of Parks’ historical worldview, of politics, of the opportunities extended by the 365 Days/365 Plays project to theaters in Pueblo, Colorado, and greater Texas, theaters way off the New York intelligentsia’s maps. Like a carnival barker, Parks is saying, “Step right up.” Detractors may see that as self-aggrandizing, but Parks’ call is sincere. She knows many of her playlets may fall flat in any corner of the country, but she believes that when given a window of opportunity, or, as she puts it, “a seat at the table,” lesser-known people and lesser-

known theaters sometimes rise to levels that nobody before had imagined. Her need to open windows and offer seats comes from the profoundest depths of who she is, and the legacy of her parents, and *their* parents—people with a third grade education who scrubbed floors and barely read a book.

**SOMEWHERE IN THE MIDDLE OF NEW YORK CITY**, their granddaughter sits at a table signing copies of a book that she wrote. The line of people winds into an anteroom. Parks works through the night, until she can barely move her hand. \*