

Editor's Notes

Critical Conversations

I surfed the internet for a useful quotation on unexpected circumstances, and I found one by author (and former supermodel) Carre Otis: “But life invariably throws us curve balls, unexpected circumstances that remind us to expect the unexpected.” The quote I selected also shows that tried and true wisdom can come from an unexpected source.

Our *Continuum* curveball was that we could not produce our planned issue on LGBTQ drama and theatre at this time. However, we do plan to do so at a future date. We had to take another path this time around, and we turned to essays that frame issues of theatre theory and criticism within a historical perspective.

It seems that every forty or fifty years, critical discourse on African diaspora drama and theatre undergoes a sea change. During the Negro Renaissance period of the 1920's, arguments over the structure and function of theatre about African Americans became more formalized. W.E.B. DuBois and Alain Locke disagreed as to whether it was more important to create a theatre of protest or one of cultural expression. The Black Arts Movement of the 1960's called for Afrocentric forms as well as socially relevant content. Today we ponder whether the aesthetic needs of Black artists and audiences can be served through a post-Black perspective. Of course, post-Blackness isn't altogether that new an idea; when Langston Hughes wrote “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain,” his defense of African retention in African American arts, he also advocated for complete freedom on the part of Black artists to create without obligation to any constrictive racial paradigm.

In my opinion, today's dramatists of color are producing exciting work while at the same time the venues most likely to produce that work for majority audiences of color appear to be disappearing. If this is post-Blackness, I find it troubling. Perhaps DuBois' dream of a national network of African American theatres, the dream August Wilson hoped to realize, will never come true, but it is still Black institutions that can provide the most nutrient-rich cultural petri dishes for Black artists to nourish their experiments. As Harry Elam Jr. and Douglas Jones Jr. state in their introduction to *The Metheun Drama Book of Post-Black Plays* (New York: Metheun, 2012), “Aesthetic interest now possibly trumps racial affinities. Yet an unequal racial playing field still figures within this equation.”(xxi)

And so we return to issues pertinent to a Black aesthetic. In our very first issue, we published an essay by Paul Carter Harrison, pioneer explorer of an aesthetic of Afrocentrism. In this issue, in a modern spirit of Sankofa, we return to the contemporary past with Henry Miller's essay, “Valorizing Ancestor Discourse: Harlem Renaissance Criticism and Theatre Theory.” Miller takes us back to the late nineteenth century, when Bob Cole and Will Marion Cook wrestled with the minstrel mask. Cook sought to control the mask through superior artistry while Cole sought to crack it through more realistic portrayals of Black life. Miller then extends their views into the DuBois vs. Locke debate, through the controversy represented by the production of Angelina Grimke's *Rachel* and efforts toward building an art theatre that would evolve into a viable African American theatre. This essay is not simply an encapsulation of sections of Miller's book, *Theorizing Black Theatre*; his goal here is to contextualize the theory and

criticism that was produced during the Harlem Renaissance period within the broader spectrum of social and political events of the time in order to remind us that “the development of black American theatre criticism and theory did not occur in a purely social and political ‘vacuum of blackness,’ divorced from major twentieth century events.”

Mikell Pinkney shows how an African-rooted musical construction, the Blues, works as a theatre and performance aesthetic, and can inspire an entire season of production. In “Shades of Blues: A Season of Resurrected Writers and Reclaimed Music,” he takes us back to the 2012-2013 of Chicago’s eta Creative Arts Foundation season while explaining how the blues works as music, as aesthetic, and as through line for a season of productions that span the second half of the twentieth century through the first decade of the twenty-first century. The thinking and aesthetic considerations that went into constructing the season may serve as a helpful template for leading an audience beyond the production issues at hand into critical/theoretical territory.

Finally, a younger scholar, Gene Bryan Johnson, in his essay “From August Wilson to Tyler Perry: Crossing Paths on the Way to Tomorrow,” posits the premise that Tyler Perry and August Wilson, though far apart aesthetically, need not be as diametrically opposed in performance as many scholars might think. Johnson begins with a historical moment, the 2007 NAACP Image Awards, returns us to the modern roots of the Urban Theatre Circuit, then propels us into a rumination on how Perry and Wilson might coexist and inform each other in the same theatre’s season. Though the discussion seems fairly wide in range, Johnson takes pains to return to the point that Perry’s work and marketing methods should not be thought of dismissively, while Wilson’s work, that some Black audience members resist as too “high brow,” can be sensitively presented while appealing to the same audience that Tyler Perry wins over so easily.

It is my hope that these essays will mark the beginning of a series of “critical conversations” that I plan to devote space to in my comments in future issues. If you have a comment that can fit on one typed page or less, please send it to me through our web site. It may stimulate someone else to comment. Commentary addressed to current events and contemporary critical/theoretical concerns will be given priority. We can all gain through sharing observations and insights. The question that I would like to begin with is: What, if any, should the social and political ends of our artistic efforts be in this new era? Again, in the words of Elam and Jones, “A recent explosion of critical literature, both popular and scholarly, coheres around this question. These writings grapple with the difficulty of how we remember the past but remain guided by the present and oriented towards the future.” (x)

We have high hopes and ambitious dreams for the future of *Continuum*. But those hopes and dreams cannot be realized without you. We need more essays. We particularly need to hear more in terms of essays from women scholars. By the end of this year, we hope to be in the journal data base that serves university and public libraries. We plan to remain an open access journal in order to continue our mission to make knowledge connected to the history, theory and criticism of African and African diaspora drama and theatre as widely accessible as we can.

For this issue we thank all of the contributors, readers, and staff. Let the conversation commence!

