

Conversations with Black Acting Methods Luminaries

Sharrell D. Lockett, Guest Editor

Conversations with Black Acting Methods Luminaries is a Special Issue that primarily consists of interviews between acclaimed theatre artists and the chapter contributors in *Black Acting Methods: Critical Approaches* (2017), edited by Sharrell D. Lockett with Tia M. Shaffer. This book has ushered in a wave of change and innovation in acting and directing classrooms, centering Black American cultural traditions in the history of theatre pedagogy. Black acting methods are defined as rituals, processes, and techniques rooted in an Afrocentric centripetal paradigm where Black theory and Black modes of expression are the nucleus that informs how one interacts with various texts, literary and embodied, and how one interprets and (re)presents imaginary circumstances.^[1] The book includes voices from formidable scholars and practitioners, such as, Rhodessa Jones, Molefi K. Asante, Freddie Hendricks, Tommie “Tonea” Stewart, Aku Kadogo and Robbie McCauley. In addition, the book is endorsed by Tony Award winning director Kenny Leon and the esteemed Anne Bogart. *Black Acting Methods: Critical Approaches* features ten offerings (chapters) that share methodologies, processes, and rituals grounded in an Afrocentric paradigm. There are also two special sections that feature theatre directors and acting teachers who primarily work outside of the academy, and an appendix that provides recommendations to promote equitable practices in actor training programs.

Since the release of the book, the authors have continued this important work in their communities and in the academy. For instance, Lockett embarked on an east coast HBCU book tour, and she launched the nation’s first Black Acting Methods® Studio program at Muhlenberg College, PA. Kashi Johnson has continued to conduct Hip Hop Theatre Master Classes at several institutions, and Justin Emeka recently discussed his work on Michael Taylor’s Theatre Corner video series.^[2] So, relative to the groundbreaking release of *Black Acting Methods: Critical Approaches* (BAM) and the generative work produced thereafter, the interviews featured in this Special Issue were borne out of the desire to engage with voices who may have studied alongside the chapter contributors, performance makers who have witnessed their work, or even progenitors of the methods themselves. These interviews serve as additional accounts of the importance of Black acting methods relative to the future of acting and directing training in the US, and even abroad.

The interviews in this Special Issue add even more context to the offerings found in BAM, as they help to illustrate and frame a broader picture of the methods and methodologies discussed in BAM. Though these interviews justifiably stand alone, it is suggested that they be read alongside the work in BAM. However, BAM’s organizational structure is different from the way the interviews are structured here. BAM begins with Methods of Social Activism, followed by Methods of Intervention, and ends with Methods of Cultural Plurality. Yet, the following interviews are organized in a different fashion, primarily because of my Q&A experience at various institutions. I have found that students and faculty tend to gravitate towards the Methods of Intervention section first because many of them feel that they are often intervening. For example, many Black students who study acting at Predominately White Institutions (PWIs) often reference being cast in roles that are not necessarily written for Black people. They find themselves cast in a white European classic or in a re-envisioned text where race ‘doesn’t exist.’ Therefore, they are rarely asked to bring their cultural specificities to the piece as an actor.

In fact, some directors purport that their productions are ‘color-blind,’ when in fact directors need to honor and recognize all of the diversities within their cast. And though actors rarely encounter these particular experiences at HBCUs, they understand that they will more than likely encounter these challenges in the professional arena. With this, I have found that actors of color quickly connect with Tawnya Pettiford-Wates’ offering (chapter), which shares how her graduate school preparation failed to prepare her for Ntozake Shange’s classic text, *for colored girls who have considered suicide / when the rainbow is enuf*. Several students might then inquire about the efficacy of ‘color-blind’ casting, and how they might invite cultural specificity into White Western Eurocentric texts, at which point I direct them to read Justin Emeka’s offering (chapter) in BAM. In addition, students often became excited about the idea of a culturally specific character analysis when I informed them about Clinnesha Sibley’s work. And as the conversations proceeded, students and faculty were inspired to learn more about methodologies rooted in Black American culture, such as, ‘SoulWork’ and The Hendricks Methods. They were also happy to learn about transnational connections to the work as well.

In response to these experiences thus far, *Conversations with Black Acting Methods Luminaries* begins with interviews that complement the Methods of Intervention section, followed by interviews connected to the Methods of Social Activism section, and ending with interviews that should be read alongside the Methods of Cultural Plurality section. It should be noted that there are eight interviews offered here, though there are ten offerings in BAM. As this interview opportunity was optional, eight of the chapter contributors in BAM submitted interviews to appear in this Special Issue.

In the first interview Justin Emeka and Tony Award winning producer Ron Simons discuss the importance of cultural specificity in theatre; asking actors to bring their full selves and cultural heritage into the rehearsal room. In this way, Emeka suggests, actors are able to work with all of the tools in their ‘tool box’ and resources of their mind, body and spirit.

Next, Tawnya Pettiford-Wates and Tony Award winning actress Trazana Beverley provide a unique, exciting, and often times, humorous look into being a classically trained actress approaching works from culturally Black directors. Pettiford-Wates discusses an encounter with the late Al Freeman Jr. in Britain, and how that spawned a series of events that led to furthering her understanding of what it means to be a Black actor in America. With her knowledge in hand, Pettiford-Wates shares more on her acting technique; “Ritual Poetic Drama within the African Continuum.”

In the third interview, consummate actor Eugene Lee explores Clinnesha Sibley’s culturally specific approaches to new play development and directing, as she highlights the commercialization of new play development in the US; as if there is only one way to develop a play. Through insightful dialogue, Eugene and Clinnesha explore how artists might sometimes compromise, but how, many times, compromise for Black artists is not an option.

The next three interviews are connected to three of the methodologies offered in the Methods of Social Activism section in BAM. During his interview with Sharrell D. Luckett, acclaimed director Freddie Hendricks discusses his writing and devising process in one of the Freddie Hendricks Youth Ensemble of Atlanta’s most notable productions, *Soweto, Soweto, Soweto: A Township is Calling!* The piece, developed in 1990-1991, is still performed today by the Youth Ensemble of Atlanta. Here, Hendricks shared insight into his process and discussed the time that the musical was performed in Johannesburg, South Africa (2000), and the transnational exchanges that took place between the Youth Ensemble of Atlanta and several young theatre makers in South Africa.

The fifth interview is between Progress Theatre founder and Director Cristal Chanelle Truscott and Performance Studies scholar and company member Greta Gabriel. Here, Truscott, defines the genesis of ‘SoulWork,’ its implications, and how it safely pushes the artistic

boundaries of actors, allowing them emotional availability. The reader will come to grasp the foundation of ‘SoulWork’ and its evolution, hallmarks, and applications of the methodology. Ultimately Truscott charts the aesthetic, artistic and cosmological genealogy of the method.

For the sixth interview, renowned theatre maker and activist Rhodessa Jones shines the spotlight on her company members to discuss the life-changing, positive effects that the Medea Project has had in their lives. In this interview, Medea Project company members Lisa Frias, Fe Bongolan, and Angela Wilson testify and witness about the work that they have completed as members of the company, and share how Jones’ approach to storytelling and cultivating community and identity has positively impacted their lived experiences.

The last two interviews engage with the work of Aku Kagodo, Kashi Johnson, and Daphnie Sicre, who are all featured in the Methods of Cultural Plurality section in BAM. Over a series of three interviews, the reader is welcomed into conversation with Aku Kadogo and Bill Harris. Long time collaborators and colleagues, Aku discusses longing and distance in the diaspora, as she lived most of her adult life, after performing in *for colored girls...*, in Australia. Kadogo shares what it means to embrace a transcontinental approach to directing, that is at once universal, and also imbued in her Black cultural identity.

The final interview is between well-known playwright and theatre leader Dr. John Shevin Foster and theatre professors Kashi Johnson and Daphnie Sicre. In this interview Johnson and Sicre discuss the ways in which they employ Hip Hop theatre pedagogy in their courses. Mapping their time together at Lehigh University as undergrads up to becoming theatre professors themselves, Johnson and Sicre share how students might feel empowered by the opportunities available to them in their courses.

Conversations with Black Acting Methods Luminaries continues the necessary work of placing Black performance practitioners and performance pedagogy rooted in Black American culture central to the current conversations surrounding equitability and cultural diversity in academic and non-academic performance spaces. This Special Issue also evidences diverse epistemologies as it relates to a Black actor’s sense of self-discovery in artistic practice. The conversations herein are relevant, exciting, and insightful to anyone who is interested in learning more about the practitioners featured in *Black Acting Methods: Critical Approaches*.

Notes

[1] Sharrell D. Luckett and Tia M. Shaffer. “Introduction: the Affirmation.” *Black Acting Methods: Critical Approaches*, eds. Sharrell D. Luckett with Tia M. Shaffer (New York: Routledge, 2017), 2.

[2] HBCU book tour footage- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JOpCkWxyO3E&t=20s> ; Interview with

Director Justin Emeka -<https://vimeo.com/222887842>