

# Review

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**LITERARY MANAGERS  
& DRAMATURGS  
OF THE AMERICAS**

*Photos (from top)  
by Cynthia SoRelle, Jill Jones,  
and Troy Hourie*

# CLASSICS IN A NEW LIGHT

## Dramaturgy at the Classical Theatre of Harlem

**By Debra Cardona**

DEBRA CARDONA is a dramaturg and actor. She received her BFA in Drama at New York University and her MFA in Dramaturgy from Brooklyn College. She has been Resident Dramaturg at The Classical Theatre of Harlem (CTH) since 2003 and has also 'turged at Women's Project, The New Harmony Project, P.S. 122 and the Kennedy Center. Debra is on the Board of Directors of the LMDA and is currently a cast member in the *Mary Poppins* national tour.

In July 2009, Sydne Mahone, associate professor of Theatre Arts at the University of Iowa, moderated a panel discussion on perspectives from African American dramaturgs at the LMDA conference. She posed these questions, enough for hours of discourse:

How do we begin to map the current dramaturgical landscape for African American theatre? Where are the sites of innovation? As playwrights and dramaturgs move into the mainstream theatres and academies, while directors and producers remain on the fringe, how does it affect the discussion of Black aesthetics? How do these dynamics alter the cultural agenda for African American theatre in the 21st century? How can dramaturgs elevate the national discussion on race?

As production dramaturg with The Classical Theatre of Harlem (CTH), and as panelist in a discussion of such a potentially large scope, how should I address these questions? Should the dialogue cover the broad spectrum? Could it — or should it — speak for the entire community of artists of color? Or could I somehow do justice to the magnitude of the conversation by focusing solely on my few years' experience from 2003–2010 with the small, Harlem-based theater company that has served as my theatrical home?

In what ways does Classical Theatre of Harlem map the current dramaturgical landscape for African American theater, establish moments of innovation, and affect the discussion of Black aesthetics as well as the national discussion of race? I believe such work is done by taking a look at its mission as a theater devoted to the classics, and by defining, or perhaps more to the point, *redefining*, what they are.

CTH made its start as a Shakespeare Workshop at the Harlem School of the Arts (HSA) and later grew into a production company, offering opportunities to artists of color in the professional New York City theater community as well as to HSA students. We perform and adapt the classics, not only those plays by “dead White men,” but also those of Black playwrights, including those from the African diaspora as well as African American playwrights. What plays should be considered part of “the canon”? While working at CTH, I have seen

the canon shifted, adjusted, to create room for West Indian playwright and Nobel Laureate Derek Walcott, as well as Americans Adrienne Kennedy, Melvin Van Peebles, August Wilson, Paul Carter Harrison, Douglas Turner Ward, Richard Wright, and Langston Hughes. It's only a beginning.

In regard to the question of mapping the current dramaturgical landscape, I would rather ask, "How can we expand that landscape for African American theater?" We do so not only by making — no, *demanding* — a place for great writers of color, but also by expanding the places for actors and directors of color to present the whole of the canon. Is that starting to happen? Actually, yes, but it is slow going, using cautious steps. And, I admit, there is a freedom in being part of a Harlem-based company, where it is automatically assumed that its productions will be created around an acting pool of mainly black artists. The discussion of race and the Black aesthetic is automatically inherent, even when it is not deliberate.

Innovation happens in the stories we choose to tell, and the first conversation must always be about how we see fit to tell them. At CTH, selecting plays by Adrienne Kennedy and Melvin Van Peebles is self-evident. The big question is: how will we approach *The Cherry Orchard* or *Waiting for Godot*? Do we present such works traditionally, or do we change the circumstances of each play to resonate with our times, or with the Harlem community?

The decision was made to present *The Cherry Orchard* in a traditional manner, set in 1904 Russia, as it was written. However, whenever I would mention to friends that I was working on the play, certain questions would inevitably arise: "Oh, you're doing it at Classical Theatre of Harlem? Where are you setting it? What are you calling it?" My answer would always be: "We're setting it in Russia and we're calling it *The Cherry Orchard*." And for some reason, that answer would be met with confused looks. It seemed to me that what

was expected from CTH was a more "Black" production (for lack of a better word), and that perhaps we were making a statement by doing this play "straight," whether we intended to or not. Did we *have* to set the play in America for it to be acceptable with a predominantly black cast? None of us on the creative team thought so. The belief that Chekhov's play needed to be re-situated in order to be performed in Harlem brings to mind a review Noel Coward wrote about Josh Logan's *The Wisteria Trees*, an Americanization of *The Cherry Orchard* set in 1905 Louisiana. In his review, Coward dubbed the play "A Month in the Wrong Country" (Gilman 202).

With our production of *Three Sisters*, the discussion of approach came up again — this time from members of the acting company. During table work, some of the biggest questions posed by the cast were: Why would CTH be doing this play now and how would the production be presented? Would it be beneficial to give it a straight approach or should it be changed? Shouldn't this production present the Prozorov family as part of the "Talented Tenth" — that is, W.E.B. DuBois's phrase to describe the one in ten African Americans who he believed would become the leaders of their race through the pursuit of higher education, writing books, and creating social change — and be set in the Harlem Renaissance? And, indeed, as a performance approach, having the Prozorovs represent DuBois's Talented Tenth certainly resonates in Vershinin's repeated theme to the sisters: after the three are gone, there will be perhaps six like them, then twelve, until people like them become the majority. Yet, during the course of the play, it becomes clear that this will not happen — Masha no longer plays the piano, Irina forgets the Italian word for "window," Olga becomes a frustrated headmistress; and Andre abandons his dream of becoming a professor at Moscow University — the pride of Russia — settling instead for a life as a petty town official. The family's talents become, as Masha says, like "an unnecessary appendage," "a sixth finger."



The CTH production of *The Cherry Orchard*, featuring: (left to right) Roslyn Ruff, Charles Turner, George Hosmer, Wendell Pierce, Petronia Paley, Earle Hyman. Photo: Jill Jones.

Why does having a theater of color meet with such resistance when it chooses a "traditional" approach to Chekhov — that is, specifically set in 1901, in Russia, with the actors playing Russians — but meets with no such resistance for "traditional" productions of Shakespeare or the Greeks? So, would a "straight" production of Chekhov best benefit CTH's audience? Should we give a more African American commentary to Chekhov's play? It was veteran actor Earle Hyman who convinced everyone at the table of the beauty of an African American theater company doing Chekhov as it was intended by the author without the need for any change. It should be noted that Earle, known by the American public as Grandpa Huxtable from *The Cosby Show*, is considered in Norway to be one of the leading interpreters of Ibsen in Norwegian, and his last role on Broadway was as Halvard Solness, *The Master Builder*. One of my favorite memories of Earle was at a talkback for *Three Sisters*. A group of theater students from Norway had attended and one of them asked him a question. He answered in fluent Norwegian. Every jaw in

the theater dropped — including my own and those of the entire *Three Sisters* cast.

In the case of *Waiting for Godot*, however, we took a post-Katrina approach. Director Chris McElroen's inspiration for the production was a photo of a man floating in the New Orleans floodwaters on a wooden door, so he decided to place Didi and Gogo on a roof in a flood. With the blessings of the Beckett estate, which is famously dogged in its insistence that the playwright's work always be performed specifically as written, a thirty-foot-long above-ground pool was bought, a roof was built inside it, and then the pool was filled with water. The new circumstances of Beckett's play made his words resound more strongly for our audience. In Act One, Gogo picked up a piece of chalk and wrote "GODOT" on the roof, just as the victims of Hurricane Katrina wrote messages on their roofs as they waited for days to be saved. Pozzo made his entrance in a rubber raft pulled by Lucky. When the blind Pozzo fell into the water during Act Two, he was actually drowning while Didi and Gogo took their time contemplating whether or not they should help him. The approach was so resonant that CTH got funding to remount the production in New Orleans.

In New Orleans, it was decided that the pool would not be needed, and the show was designed in a style that was closer to Beckett's original set — but this time, it was performed on a street in the destroyed lower Ninth Ward, a spot described as a once-bustling corner now marked only by "knee high weeds and crooked streetlamps" (Brown). Two free performances were scheduled and bleachers were provided to seat about 600 people. The word, however, got out about the production and both nights over 1000 people showed up. Not everyone that came knew they were going to see a Beckett play. They had only heard that there was a show "about the Ninth Ward" being performed and they wanted to see it. A third show was added. An article in the UK-based *Guardian* noted: "So many lines reverberated with post-Katrina meaning — 'where are all these corpses from?'; 'there's no lack of void'; 'things have changed here since yesterday'; 'do you not recognise the place? Recognise? What is there to recognise!' — that the audience darkly chuckled throughout the entire show" (Brown). Beckett's words pronounced in this setting made the play seem as if it had been written just for New Orleans.

In Derek Walcott's *Dream on Monkey Mountain*, director Alfred Preisser had to address an aspect of black culture that was not specifically African American, but that was concerned with the effects of colonialism. It is the story of a poor charcoal burner named Makak, meaning Monkey — a man full so of self-loathing that he cannot look into a mirror because he thinks himself so ugly; he lives alone on a mountain and comes down solely to sell his charcoal and get drunk on the proceeds. During the course of a drunken night in jail, Makak sees an Apparition, a white woman, who tells him he is not a Monkey, but a Lion and an African king; he goes on a quest to return to Africa and claim his kingdom, and in turn, embrace his Blackness. Once crowned king, Makak is forced by an angry mob to reject the



The CTH production of *Three Sisters*, featuring: (front row) Sabrina LeBeauf (Olga), Carmen Gill (Irina), and Amanda Mason Warren (Masha). (back row) Philip Christian (Solyony) and Josh Tyson (Tuzenbach). Photo: Troy Hourie.

colonial world, which he condemns to death, and to behold the White Apparition — the source of his vision, but also of his self-hatred. This final act frees him from the bitterness of his obsessions, and he awakens from his dream no longer thinking of himself as an animal, but as a man. Released from jail, he returns to his hut on the mountain with a new sense of self-acceptance and identity. With its indictment of colonial society, history, and law, the play could easily be interpreted as anti-white, but that was not Walcott's intention, for Walcott himself said: "Maturity is the assimilation of the features of every ancestor" (Muse 370).

*Dream on Monkey Mountain* is a play that crosses cultures. Just as the entire creative team had to learn much about Russian culture in the Chekhov plays, we immersed ourselves in the culture of St. Lucia and Trinidad — the former being Walcott's birthplace and the latter where *Dream on Monkey Mountain* was originally produced. It is a play with music and traditional dances, but there is no score available, so I spent several months tracking down recordings of the calypsos cited in the play as well as hunting down video recordings of West Indian dances. We had a dialect coach, and I provided a patois dictionary for the cast. Luckily for us, one of our cast members was from St. Lucia. In an early rehearsal, we asked her to tell stories from her childhood, including some animal stories passed down by the storytellers in her town. If any specific questions came up she was always ready to help, and she gently corrected us if we "got it wrong."

A couple of episodes in Walcott's play presented us with potentially sticky situations. The most problematic: how were we going to portray the Apparition — a white woman — and then have a black man kill her onstage? In the Negro Ensemble Company's production in the early 1970s, the crowd applauded when the Apparition was beheaded. But how does such an action reverberate in the 21st century, and was that the reaction that author Walcott intended? The

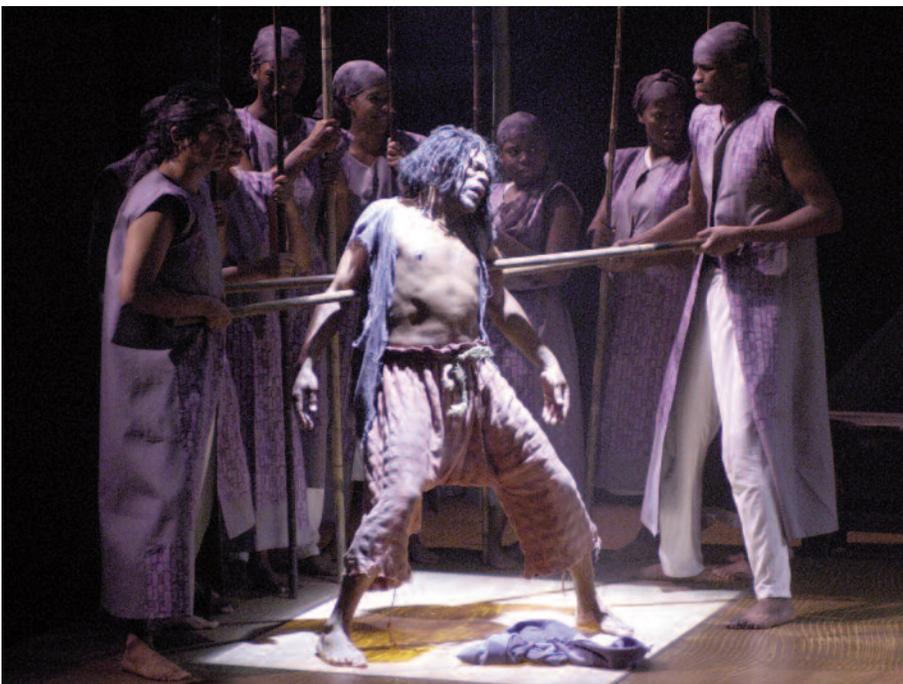


J. Kyle Manzay and Wendell Pierce in the CTH production of *Waiting for Godot*. Photo: Jill Jones.

director — CTH artistic director Alfred Preisser — and I were able to watch a video and read reviews of Bill T. Jones’s production at The Guthrie Theater. Jones portrayed the Apparition as a shaft of light, feeling — after consulting Maya Angelou about the play — that the ritual sacrifice of a white woman on stage was a cliché. Again resisting cliché, at the end of the play, as Makak returned to his mountain, Jones replaced him with a group of young black men with boom boxes, exploding as one Denver critic called it, “the potential sentimentality” of the play. So how was CTH going to han-

dle these important moments? Director Preisser did not want to use a white woman either, feeling the same way as Jones. In the course of my research I had discovered that Walcott was extremely influenced by Kabuki theater at the time he was writing *Dream on Monkey Mountain*, and that he felt that the beheading of the Apparition (described to be “like the moon walking along her own road” in his play) was necessary because, “Getting rid of his overwhelming awe of everything white is the first step every colonial must take. The error is that when you translate this into *political* terms it leads — wrongly, disastrously — into acts of murder and eventually genocide” (King 249). Walcott has said that the crisis in the play was a spiritual one, rather than political. He described it as “the search for self respect and pride” (Baer 38). With this in mind and in keeping with the incorporation of Kabuki into his production concept, Preisser decided to make the character of the Apparition more figurative than literal and hired Délé, a breathtaking dark-skinned black woman who moved like a dancer, draped her in white and powdered her moon-shaped face a ghostly white. At the point of actual beheading, there was a blackout. When the lights came back up, Makak was found back in his cell. The ending was performed as written, with no addition or modern-day commentary on what came before, allowing the play the possibility of its sentimentality.

During the course of the run, Derek Walcott visited a number of times, which was exhilarating and a little frightening. When we were introduced, he commented on how far the production had come along since he first saw it the week before. I told him how much I enjoyed working on the play and ventured to ask, “So, how did we do?” A warm smile formed on his lips and his eyes glowed. He then said, “You did very well.”



From the CTH production of *Dream on Monkey Mountain*, featuring Andre De Shields as Makak. Photo: Jill Jones.

So, how does a theater company map the current dramaturgical landscape for African American theater, establish moments of innovation, and affect the discussion of the Black aesthetic as well as the discussion of race? Most certainly, the casts and creative teams at Classical Theatre of Harlem explore the issues raised by these questions in every project undertaken; the exploration is carried on in the work that is produced, and it is reflected in the content of what we, as theater artists, choose to put on stage (such as redefining what is considered “a classic”), as well as the form, or how we choose to put our stories on stage. Whether we take a traditional approach or a risky one that shakes up what audiences have come to take for granted, we show classics in a new light. We have the ability to influence — and be influenced — by initiating tough conversations that permit us to

confront our fears and move beyond them to the place where we are not afraid to examine the many possibilities of such questions. I believe it is one of the most crucial and exciting parts of what we, as dramaturgs, do.

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The CTH production of *Waiting for Godot*, featuring: Wendell Pierce (Vladimir), J. Kyle Manzay (Estragon), Chris McKinney (Pozzo), and Billy Eugene Jones (Lucky).

Photo: Jill Jones.