

SUZAN-LORI PARKS

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CONNECTING TO THE RIVER IN 365DAYS/365PLAYS

HOW DO YOU WRITE A PLAY A DAY for a year? If you are Pulitzer Prize-winning dramatist Suzan-Lori Parks, the answer lies deep in the river of spirit. Somewhere between Sam Shepard and Tennessee Williams.

“Sam Shepard wrote this great essay about time back when he was really in his wild and experimental phase,” explains Parks. “That the idea of the full-length play needed to be re-examined. A lot of people write a certain length just to call it a full-length play when most plays need to be much shorter to fulfill their destiny. Basically because they say everything they need to say in the first three minutes. Then you’re sitting for the next 17 hours or whatever just hearing a rehash.

“I’m one of those writers who believes when it comes to the text there’s a moment like in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* where Brick says he drinks until he hears the click. It’s the same kind of thing with me. I write until I hear the click. And then it’s done as far as my relationship to it on the page.”

Audiences across the country will see the results of more than 365 daily clicks this fall when the world premiere of Parks’ play cycle, *365 Days/365Plays*, is performed simultaneously as a year long national festival in major cities and communities. From November 13, 2006 to November 12, 2007, more than 600 theatre companies in Los Angeles, New York, San Francisco, Seattle, Chicago, Atlanta, Denver, Austin, Minneapolis, Washington, D.C., the Carolinas, Mississippi River towns, South Texas and university campuses will create what is being billed as the “largest theatre collaboration in U.S. history.”

The dates correspond exactly to those Parks spent from 2002 to 2003 devoted to writing whatever idea for a play she says made itself known to her each morning. Ranging in length from a half page to five, solo shows to ensemble

works, the pieces offer a sequential encapsulation of a year’s musings inspired by national topics to everyday observances.

“They were sort of like snapshots,” she explains over a late September lunch in the upstairs loft at The Cow’s End coffee house near her Venice Beach home. “I haven’t been in this room in a long time and they painted it red. If I were writing a play today, it would have a lot of red in it. So it’s like you do that. Then it tells you when it’s done. I can’t describe it. It won’t stop.”

Neither has Parks. The same year she started her 365 cycle of plays, the playwright, screenwriter and novelist became the first African American woman to win a Pulitzer Prize for drama for *Topdog/Underdog*—the day after it opened on Broadway. The MacArthur Foundation gifted her one of its \$500,000 “Genius” Awards the previous year. In 2003, Random House published her first novel, *Getting Mother’s Body*. Parks’ adaptation of Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* for Oprah Winfrey Presents premiered last year on ABC and now she’s finishing the book for a Ray Charles stage musical for the film producers of *Ray*.

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OF SPIRIT



IT REVEALS COMMUNITY WHERE IT ALREADY EXISTS.”

Quite a weighty legacy for someone barely into her 40s who, clad in a short skirt, leather jacket and motorcycle boots, could easily pass for one of her former CalArts students. Parks is an engaging conversationalist who takes her writing seriously but clearly not herself. When asked her reaction to being hailed August Wilson's heir apparent, Parks indicates her signature dreadlocks laughing, "I'm the *hair* apparent."



"Artists who are pompous jerks really give artists a bad name," she emphasizes. "August Wilson believed a legacy comes upon you. Ray Charles said it over and over because they called him 'the genius.' He said, 'The genius came before me and it came through me.'"

"It comes through you when you're dropping down into something bigger than you. It's not me me me my my my my. I think a lot of artists who do posture and pose and talk about themselves constantly are not appropriately recognizing the experience. They are not giving it its due. It's bigger than they are."

Parks admits that her recent awards and heightened visibility carry with them a certain role model expectation she is reluctant to fill.

"I know a lot of people expect me to be a certain kind of person," she says. "But at the end of the day I can only be me. No, I'm serious!" She laughs. "Some people are disappointed because they expect you to be more scholarly or angrier.

More quote unquote political, which means political in the way that they think someone should be political. More scholarly meaning there is a certain language that people use to talk about literature and I don't have an MFA. I didn't come up through that road, so I'm not familiar with that way of talking about writing.

"People expect you to fit the role they've created. Well, I create my own roles!" She laughs again. "As we all should. That's where it gets to be really exciting. You stay grounded. You stay dipping into that river of spirit. You're kind and generous to everyone you meet. And you create your own roles. Plural. Always plural."

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PUTTING IT TOGETHER

Parks' year long experiment might have stayed a writing exercise if longtime collaborator Bonnie Metzgar, former Associate Producer at the Public Theater under George C. Wolfe and current Associate Artistic Director of the Curious Theatre Company in Denver, hadn't pushed her to release them. Together they created a unique production model for the plays—a simultaneous and shared world premiere involving hundreds of theatre companies across the country. Now they simply needed to convince others to embrace their vision like Center Theatre Group Artistic Director Michael Ritchie.

"We didn't really know how to go about manifesting it," Parks admits. "So we figured we'd just ask some artistic directors we'd met or we had long relationships with to get their feel. Is it crazy or is it a good idea? I have a long relationship with the Public but since I live in LA, one of the first people I talked with was Mike Ritchie. And he was just great."

Ironically, competing schedules kept the two from meeting on home turf. A last minute cell phone call coincidentally found both in San

Francisco on business where they finally connected at a corner coffee shop.

“I don’t even think I’d played out the whole concept when he said, we’re on board. LA is going to be the best. He was so enthusiastic. Often during those first few months when we were still trying to figure out how to put this all together, I’d e-mail him or call him. How do we do this, what do you think about that?”

“David Esbjornson is also a good friend of mine who directed the world premiere of *In the Blood*. He’s now the artistic director of Seattle Rep. Nick Schwartz-Hall. The Public. They were all really excited so we just kept moving forward hooking up with cities and theatres. We started out wanting seven cities with 52 companies. Now we have like 15, it’s crazy.”

In each of the participating cities or regions, one major hub or group of hub theatres coordinates a local 365 network comprised of a diverse mix of 52 theatre companies, performing arts organizations and individual producers. Center Theatre Group anchors the Los Angeles hub in alliance with hub partners The Theatre @ Boston Court, City Garage, Ghost Road Theatre Company, Son of Semele Ensemble and LA Stage Alliance. Participating organizations range from the Watts Village Theatre Company to the Geffen Playhouse, Latino Theatre Company to Deaf West Theatre, Critical Mass Performance Group to Zoo District.

Each company is assigned one week of plays to produce in any manner or location they see fit before “passing the baton” to another organization or artist in their area. Each week is performed simultaneously in participating cities or region. The plays must be performed in the order Parks wrote them for free admission or “pass the hat” but can be staged virtually anywhere or as often as each company desires within that week.

In Los Angeles, Center Theatre Group will produce the first seven plays of the cycle for free on Wednesday, Nov. 15 at 8:30 pm on the Music Center Plaza, directed by Bart DeLorenzo. The performance will be followed by a festival kick-off celebration at REDCAT. Locations for subsequent festival weeks are posted on www.365inla.com.

“The plays can be performed on the street or in the lobby before another show,” says Parks. “Costumes. No costumes. Full production or staged reading. All seven on Monday or one a day for a dollar a day. I decided the licensing fees should be a dollar a day to allow all kinds of theatres to participate. That was really important to me.”

“We have a lot of young theatre groups involved from all over the country. We have the known folks and the big dogs but we also have people who are just coming up like Steel City Theatre in Pueblo, Colorado. People who are cool and groovy and doing theatre with great track records we’ve never heard of before. Until now. Now we’ve heard of them. And now they’re part of the group.”

In cities where more than 52 theatre companies applied, Parks says the criterion for selection was “excellence of application.”

“It’s not based upon how much money you planned to spend,” Parks emphasizes. “It’s more like what’s your

11/17 VEUVE CLICQUOT

The Condemned: Beef Bourguignonne, with the raspberry reduction, garlic mashed potatoes—and could they make them without milk?

Walter: I’ll ask.

The Condemned: Great. White poached asparagus, organic greens with a lemon vinaigrette.

Walter: Dessert?

The Condemned: I get a dessert?

Walter: Yep.

The Condemned: Death By Chocolate Soufflé.

Walter: That’s funny.

The Condemned: I was a comedian. Once.

Walter: Really.

(Rest)

What to drink?

The Condemned: Veuve Clicquot.

Walter: Wassat?

The Condemned: Champagne.

Walter: Why didn’t you just say “champagne?”

The Condemned: Cause its called Veuve Clicquot.

Walter: That’s yr whole entire problem, if you ask me.

The Condemned: Im not asking you.

Walter: You think yr smarter than the rest of the general population, and *that* is yr whole entire problem.

The Condemned: Im just trying to enjoy myself is all.

Walter: Veuve Clicquot.

The Condemned: Forget it.

Walter: I’ll see what I can do.

The Condemned: I dont want it anymore. I wanna change my order.

Walter: I wrote everything down already.

The Condemned

Walter

(Rest)

Walter: I let you get away with—

The Condemned: With murder?

Walter: Ina miss you. You make me laugh. But not in the way the others make me laugh. Yr jokes are—they always got like a twist to them.

The Condemned: Twisted jokes from a twisted mind.

Walter: Yeah. I’ll miss that.

The Condemned: Me too. I think. But I might not. Maybe missing is only something we do when we’re alive. And when we’re dead we are missed but dont miss.

Walter: Yeah. Whattl it be?

The Condemned: Gimmie French fries, lotsa ketchup and hot sauce, double-decker burger with nice thick patties, root beer float and apple pie à la mode.

Walter: Pie what?

The Condemned: “In the fashion.”

Walter: In the fashion of what?

The Condemned: For-get-it. Just bring me some apple pie with a scoop of vanilla ice cream.

Walter: You want the ice cream on top?

The Condemned: Yeah.

Walter: You got it.

The Condemned: And make it a cheeseburger. With bacon. And a new battery for the remote!

Walter: Sure.

Walter exits. A Chorus of Murdered Women comes in.

Murdered Women:

On the last day of my life
I was minding my own bizness
I wasnt doing nothing special
I wasnt eating no
à la mode.

I was washing all the dishes
I was picking up the kids
on the last day of my life
when he did what he did.

They stand there staring at The Condemned.
The Walter comes back in with the food.

The Condemned: Microwaved?

Walter: Yeah.

The Condemned: Like I’ll be in a minute.

Walter: Hey. Enjoy yr meal.

The Condemned: Yeah.

He eats. The Walter exits. The Chorus of Murdered Women stands there watching him eat. “Being a man is never having to say yr sorry,” The Condemned says. Not out loud. Only to himself, in his head. He picks up the remote and eats with one hand and channel-surfs with the other, pretending theyre not staring at him but knowing that they are, and his guilt for his crimes comes moving toward him across the room like a shadow as the day grows longer, moving on toward him even as the tv goes full blast.

“I DON’T TELL PEOPLE ANYTHING”

artistic vision? What do you plan to do? One group said we’ve got these seven locations and we’d like to do each of the plays in these locations. That was a cool idea. We’re going to do it on top of a mountain. That was a cool idea. We’re going to do it outside of our theatre. And you see that they are of modest means but they have a really good track record and have been in the community a long time, so you want them, too.”

Every theatre that participates also gets an extra packet of three plays called “The Constants” which are independent of the 365 chronology. “The Constants” can appear anywhere within a given week.

“They’re sort of like spice,” says Parks. “You can put them anywhere you want, yet within our diversity there’s almost this written similarity sewn in. One is called *Inaction and Action*. Someone is dressed in mourning and just standing there. You hear the sound of wind or whales. And that’s the play. It’s one of the forever plays. There’s many forever plays in the cycle. So while some plays might only be a half a page long or a quarter-page long, the running time is forever. So it says this action should be completed forever. So they’re long. There are some plays that are very long.”

365: AN EXPERIMENTAL “BLACK” PLAY

Not everyone Parks approached to participate in 365 immediately embraced its collaborative potential or viewed it as an experimental work. To them, Parks was an “uptown” artist.

“A couple of months ago, we were talking to this person about 365 and he was so not into it,” says Parks. “I said I feel like you’re not trusting what we’re putting on the table and he said well you’re a Broadway playwright. I almost fell out of my chair. Oh, this is perfect. Twenty years of writing. One play on Broadway.

“A lot of people didn’t see *Topdog/Underdog* as experimental. I had to remind them being an African American woman playwright on Broadway is experimental. We’re not doing what I would call a classic August Wilson play. We’re doing *Topdog/Underdog* about these two guys who are not very presentable as my mother would say. They’re in their underwear sometimes during the play. It’s still experimental.”

Others argued that 365 could not be classified as a “black” play. Parks claims that it is — if one can expand the current definition.

“I was talking to *Essence* magazine about it

being a black play,” she explains. “Someone said it’s not a black play. And I said yes it is. Let us expand the definition. If we can use the definition to box somebody in and limit somebody — if the definition is in use — then let us keep using the definition and realize what it really is. Maybe a black play is a play that includes everybody. You know what I mean? Maybe that’s what a black play is.

“A black play is a play that is inclusive. A black play is a play that allows all kinds of manifestations and freedom for all kinds of different people. Maybe that’s what a black play is. I don’t know. The traditional definition is a black play has black actors written by a black writer that deals with things of race or slavery. That can’t be true. 365 doesn’t deal with that.”

A RIVER RUNS THROUGH IT

Many people have asked Parks to define the “through line” of her 365 cycle. The answer she says came during a cold reading of the first six months of plays held in New York with actors who had either done her world premieres or with whom she had always wanted to work such as David Patrick Kelly, Joan MacIntosh, S. Epatha Merkerson, Adina Porter, Michael Potts, Gail Grate and Reggie Montgomery.

After the table read, it was MacIntosh who illuminated 365’s gift. “This is like connecting with the river of spirit. It drops me down into a meditative state where I understand the vastness of what theatre can be and what theatre can do.”

“That’s what I had to drop down into every day of writing,” says Parks. “I had to drop down through the everyday experience into the vastness. And if you do that repeatedly, it’s like meditation, you know? You drop down into that deeper place and it’s on the page. It’s there. And it can be revisited by everybody when we do the plays.”

Parks is quick to emphasize however that 365 is not designed to bring people together but to show them that they’ve been standing side-by-side all along.

“I don’t tell people anything, I show people what’s there,” says Parks. “I’ve said this from the very beginning. This project is not about creating community. It reveals community where it already exists. It’s very important. I’m just blowing the dust off so people can realize, oh my gosh, we’ve been holding hands all this time. That’s what keeps happening.

“We’re not creating anything. We’re revealing everything by connecting down in that river of spirit.” ■

365Days/365Plays

Nov. 13, 2006–
Nov. 12, 2007
Opening Night
Production
Wed., Nov. 15; 8:30 pm
Tickets for the festival
are free or
“pass the hat”
Music Center Plaza
135 N. Grand Ave.,
Los Angeles
213.628.2772
For the complete
Los Angeles
365Days/365Plays
weekly festival
schedule, visit
www.365inla.com

The book edition of 365
DAYS/365 PLAYS is
available beginning
Nov. 13 from TCG’s
online bookstore at
www.tcg.org, or by
calling TCG’s customer
service department
at 212.609.5900.

It will be on the shelves
of independent book-
stores by Nov. 17 and
at the larger chains
(Barnes & Noble,
Borders, etc.) closer to
the end of November.
It can be pre-ordered
from Amazon.

The cover price is \$17.95.