

## ***Covering the Ground We Stand On:*** **Trazana Beverley and Tawnya Pettiford-Wates in Conversation**

April 19, 2015

In reference to Offering 6 – “Ritual Poetic Drama within the African Continuum: the journey from Shakespeare to Shange” by Tawnya Pettiford-Wates in *Black Acting Methods: Critical Approaches*

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### **Abstract**

Tony Award winning actress Trazana Beverley sits down to talk with Tawnya Pettiford-Wates, artist, scholar, and activist on the impact of an emergent methodology called the use of Ritual Poetic Drama within the African continuum (RPD) as a tool to facilitate the training of performing artists within an African-centered or Black aesthetic. Significantly both Beverley and Pettiford-Wates were classically trained actors within a Western European model of traditional conservatory programs housed within the top-tier Colleges of Fine Arts at New York University and Carnegie-Mellon University respectively. Both acknowledge the need to focus on embracing a more liberating methodology for the Black-performing artist that is immersed within a Black Aesthetic.

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**TRAZANA BEVERLEY**



**TAWNYA PETTIFORD-WATES**

Trazana Beverley had a tremendous impact on the dramatic arts when she won the Tony Award in 1976 for her seminal performance of the Lady in Red in Ntozake Shange’s transformative play *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf*. Historically it was the first time a cast of all Black women, in a dramatic play, were not only featured individually but also created a powerful ensemble on a Broadway stage. I believe the play altered the perception of Black women and was instrumental in bringing her voice from the margins to the center. At least for a period of time, *for colored girls...* was the talk of the town and the toast of the “Great White Way.” Shange’s play was so powerful, it was honored by many awards committees in a category all by itself. It was not in the form of the so-called “well-made-play.” No. It was a choreopoem as defined by the author herself. It had music but was not a musical. It was not linear nor was it in the traditional form of the story of a central character, hero or heroine, antagonist or protagonist. It was classic but not “classical” within the Western European definition or frame. It was poetic and it was dramatic. It was story and it was melodic. But it was self-defining and authentically crafted within the African continuum and stood squarely and BOLDLY within the Black Aesthetic unequivocally without apology.

I began a transformational journey in 1977 when I joined the sisterhood of *colored girls* who were a part of the New York Shakespeare Festival's production of *for colored girls...* and first met Trazana Beverley. Trazana became a mentor, a guide and a friend. Trazana Beverley on stage is truly a force and *for colored girls...* was the perfect vehicle for her. "Black Girl Magic" is a term euphemistically used today to, at times, characterize the power and potency of the mystique of Black women, Black sisterhood and so on. How intimidating is that type of power? And how difficult it can be for some folks to embrace or even encounter? I always wondered how different Trazana's professional journey might have been had there been more opportunities offered by those gatekeepers of the industry? If only some had been more courageous or at least more adventurous. The evolution of my work and my own creative process was heavily influenced by my *colored girls...* journey. It was liberating and empowering on so many levels. It unlocked the door towards self-determination in my artistic expression and ultimately self-actualization.

The power and potency of the work in which I am currently engaged is rooted in the ritual, spiritual and artistic awakening of the experiences and encounters I had during the time I spent with the women of *for colored girls...* and in particular, witnessing, first-hand, the potency and authenticity of the artistic brilliance of Trazana Beverley each night on stage. We have come full circle as ritual cycles do. The interview below was full of laughter, reconnection, recognition and honor. I was humbled by Trazana's curiosity and the value she ascribed to the process of the use of Ritual Poetic Drama Within the African Continuum (RPD) and the need to include it in artistic study.

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- Trazana: OK, Tawnya, I remember reading of your background at Carnegie Mellon, and how a theatre man, a wonderful theatre man named Israel Hicks was your teacher at Carnegie Mellon, and was a tremendous influence on you and your students. I have a feeling that kind of started to lay the groundwork for your feelings and perspective on Black Theatre.
- Tawnya: Israel Hicks, who you know as a dear friend as well...
- Trazana: Indeed.
- Tawnya: He was a graduate from the directing program at NYU with Oz Scott, who directed *For Colored Girls...* Israel did have a tremendous impact on my perceptions of Black Theatre, but I consider my time in the company of "*For Colored Girls Who Considered Suicide/when the rainbow is enuf*" my graduate degree program.
- Trazana: Yes.
- Tawnya: Israel was the only Black teacher I ever had in the arts. He was very real, very down to earth. I went to Carnegie Mellon at a time when, in the freshman class of say thirty-eight (38) students, eight (8) of us were Black. And Israel was a first year acting teacher, and he had a major influence, over the entire freshman class. I think, in particular, he was very instrumental in the tutelage of the eight of us who were coming into this formidable conservatory program with this incredible legacy. I think he helped to keep us within the lines. He helped us not to be overwhelmed or intimidated, or... lost. I think he recognized that we needed to have some sort of definition about who we were (as Black artists) in the industry, which NO ONE else was talking about.
- Trazana: Right, right, right.
- Tawnya: Even though, here we were, all making history... making history. I think that he was up-front with us about it.
- Tawnya: (*laughing*) We called ourselves *The Black Conference*.

Trazana: *(laughing)* I love it. I love it.

Tawnya: *(laughing)* The precursor to The Black Caucus...

Tawnya: We had a special relationship with him. He was the only Black professor... and he was young, charismatic. And he was Big Time at this prestigious institution called Carnegie Mellon.

Trazana: Yes.

Tawnya: It was at a time when Black artists were... I think really wrestling with legitimacy, our legitimacy as artists. Being first year acting students, we didn't know what we were wrestling with.  
*(Laughing)* You know we were newbies, so...

Trazana: Right, right, right.

Tawnya: Israel had colleagues and friends, he'd expose us to like August Wilson, and he would pose these questions and make these challenges to us.

Trazana: What kind of questions would he pose?

Tawnya: I think they were typical questions that an acting teacher poses, like "What are you doing?"  
*(Laughing)* "What do you want?"

Trazana: Sure.

Tawnya: Or, "Why are you... WHY are you doing that?" "Why are you making that choice, or this choice?" But for us it had a more potent and deeper meaning. And, he was basically saying to us, "I don't want you imitating what you think you're supposed to do." "I don't want you imitating something or somebody, I want some authenticity."

Trazana: Um, hum.

Tawnya: And for somebody who is eighteen or nineteen years old...that's a huge question.

Trazana: Well, you and I were talking earlier because I also teach acting and directing at The Juilliard School, and we were talking about helping young actors to discover who they are...culturally. And this seemed to be something that Israel really helped you and your other black colleagues with... at the school. You also spoke about Freeman...

Tawnya: Oh yeah,

Trazana: ... in England where you studied. Where did you study?

Tawnya: At The Central School of Drama, Speech and Film, and I was very enamored with... British culture... as a young artist, what I was seeing at the time, British theatre was "IT." It was the definition, or the epitome of IT.

Trazana: Yes!

Tawnya: And here I was at this old English school, this very established old English school, and part of the course of training was that we go to the theatre and we see artists. And I was very fortunate. As a very young person I was sitting two, three, four, five rows from people like Sir John Gielgud, Sir Ralph Richardson, Maggie Smith, Michael Caine, Richard Chamberlain, and Richard Burton. I was seeing these people LIVE on stage, in person doing the Cannon. So I

watched The Royal Shakespeare Company, but also the cannon of classic theatre and modern drama. Classics like... I saw Maggie Smith do *Hedda Gabler*.

Trazana: Yes...

Tawnya: I saw Sir John Gielgud and Michael Caine do *Sleuth*. I saw Richard Burton on stage in London doing *Equus*.

Trazana: Yes, Yes.

Tawnya: I was on stage with him! This was at a time when I was extremely impressionable, and also my frame of reference wasn't very large, and European theater was IT. It was the measurement.

Trazana: How did Freeman help you turn the dial on that and get a deeper perspective on who you were as an African American woman, a Black woman in relationship to the actors you were seeing on the British stage?

Tawnya: I was in awe of them. First of all in England, the food is not good (laughing), so it was an adventure finding food to eat. I was out eating Chinese food, in London, and I'm sitting there, and I look across the room and we notice each other, right? We're Black; other black people in the space you notice. And I noticed this gentleman sitting there very distinguished, and I realized that I knew him. You know, when you recognize someone, like... I know him, who is he? And it comes to me, as I had just seen a made-for-TV movie called *My Sweet Charlie*, starring Patty Duke and Al Freeman, Jr. was her co-star. He was fabulous in the movie!

Trazana: Yes!

Tawnya: ... Oh my God, that's Al Freeman, Jr. sitting over there! I didn't want to impose or intrude, people are having dinner, he was reading the paper, clearly he was having his space. I kept talking to myself... Should I talk to him? Should I approach him? And so I finished up my meal and I decided to speak to him on the way out. I just wanted him to know that I did recognize him, and I REALLY appreciated his work. I was very impressed by his work in that movie in particular. This was on Prime Time Television. I mean we didn't see many Blacks in lead roles, at that particular time that was the early 70s...

Trazana: Right, right, right.

Tawnya: I'm in the same space with this person. So he asked me to sit down and have tea with him. He asked me to sit and have a meal, but I said I had already eaten and was on my way out. He said, "How would you like to sit and have a spot of tea?" He explained to me that he was in England working for the BBC, shooting something -- I don't remember what it was - and he asked, "What are YOU doing here?" (*Laughing*)

Trazana: (*Laughing*) Right, right, right.

Tawnya: ... because he could clearly tell I wasn't British. I told him that I was there studying at the Central School. And he said, "Well, how do you like that?" Again, here's a man like Israel Hicks... one of the things that Israel did was ask challenging questions. Things that seem very simple, but you can tell there is more to the question they are asking than just the question itself.

Trazana: Right

Tawnya: I said, "It's great! I'm seeing theatre, and doing blah, blah, blah..." And he said, "So WHY did you decide to come to England to study? Do you want to be an English actor?" That just seemed like a very odd question to me. Part of me wanted to say YES! (*Laughing*) Because I had just seen Richard Chamberlain in *Hamlet*, and I wanted to be Ophelia...

Trazana: Sure

Tawnya: But I thought better of it and I said, “No, I don’t want to be British. I’m an American, and I want to do American theatre.” I felt like this was a time of study, and ultimately I would, of course, be acting in the United States. And when I said that he just looked at me and simply said, “Then you should be studying in America.” I said “Why? Why do you say that?” ... He said, “Well, you know the British course of study, the way they train here, they will turn you into a British actor. And, you’re an African American, you’re a Black actor, and it will be very difficult for you to maintain that identity and be over here, studying to be a British actor, and fit into their cannon of theatre.” It never dawned on me that my culture or my color, my ethnicity or my nationality really had anything to do with my art.

Trazana: That’s interesting...

Tawnya: I just never thought about it, and he brought that to light. It started to make me think...question and consider that when I went to the theatre, as I was watching the plays I was watching...

Trazana: Right, right, right.

Tawnya: Of the theatre I was seeing, I didn’t see myself represented. Who am I seeing on the stage? Who’s playing the major roles? What am I seeing on the BBC right now? I didn’t really see myself. So, I knew he knew what he was talking about. And he said, “When I’m finished with this job, I’ll be headed back to the United States.”

Trazana: Um, hum.

Tawnya: So, he pricked something in my consciousness... before Israel. This was the first “HmMMM? I’m a Black actor.”

Trazana: You had auditioned for The Juilliard School, and you were accepted, but you didn’t go there. And you said you also auditioned for NYU School of the Arts, and obviously Carnegie Mellon, and you ended up going to Carnegie Mellon. Why did you make that choice?

Tawnya: I started to explore what schools were available in the United States. And Carnegie Mellon was at the top of the list. There’s Juilliard, and you know I was looking at top tier schools. ‘Cause I was at a top tier school in England, I wanted something that was comparable, and Carnegie Mellon was the oldest. So I went to a kind of summer intensive to try it out, and that’s when I met Israel Hicks. He encouraged me to apply to Carnegie Mellon. I liked what he was teaching. He was new, fresh, hip, you know, not CLASSICAL.... but Contemporary.

Trazana: Exactly

Tawnya: I think that’s why I chose it, and the two schools I was considering the most seriously beside Carnegie Mellon were Juilliard and NYU – basically because of their reputation, and proximity to New York, Broadway, the epicenter of all of that. And after coming here to New York I began to feel that, if I chose one of those two, I might not be focused enough on actual study.

Trazana: That’s right.

Tawnya: I could be easily distracted into the fray and not finish my studies.

Trazana: That was very insightful of you, as a young actress, to know yourself. Well now, you had a very interesting experience because it was just after you graduated when you got into the Broadway show *for colored girls*....

Tawnya: YA!

Trazana: And you said that... you felt that *for colored girls*... was your graduate training. Clearly it opened you up even more to who you were as a Black woman in the theatre with sensibilities.

Tawnya: Well first of all, the plays that I did when I was at Carnegie Mellon, besides the classics, I forget the name of the character, but it was the cousin in Tennessee Williams' *Suddenly Last Summer*.

Trazana: Oh, yeah.

Tawnya: I played Luciana in *Comedy of Errors*. I played Elizabeth in *The Crucible*, all iconic "American Theatre" parts. The American Cannon, you know... Arthur Miller, Williams, Odets. I did William Inge's *Picnic*. But when Israel directed us (The Black Conference), at Carnegie- Mellon, we did *The River Niger* by Douglas Turner Ward and Melvin Van Peebles' *Ain't Supposed To Die A Natural Death*. And there was a real difference between who I was in those plays. The characters that I played in the "classic" cannon, as compared to the characters I played in these iconic classic African American theatre pieces was most definitively different. When I got out of school I felt extremely READY to embark upon a professional career. I was well trained. I felt my instrument was ready, vocally and physically. I knew about analysis and character development. Technically I felt ready. And then I went to New York because a woman who graduated from Carnegie Mellon, you know her, Risa Collins...

Trazana: Um, hum.

Tawnya: was in the original company of *for colored girls*... with YOU, and that made me want to see it more. Of course it was "all the buzz." It was a hit in New York. It was new, it was fresh, it was something people hadn't seen before, and she was in that show, and so I wanted to see it. When I went there, to the Booth Theatre on a Wednesday matinee, I was absolutely transformed... I had never been transported in the theatre in the way I was on that day, that afternoon. I actually saw myself...

Trazana: Yes.

Tawnya: ...on stage. Not as a character, but myself.

Trazana: Yah...

Tawnya: Like I actually saw myself. I said to the person I came with. "I'm supposed to be in THAT play."

Trazana: Oh, wow...

Tawnya: I hadn't realized that the audience had left the theatre. I was in a zone, and I was sitting in the theatre, just me and my companion, and the usher finally said, "Excuse me, but you're gonna have to leave." And that's when I noticed that we were alone.

Trazana: Oh yeah...

Tawnya: I said, "I have to be in that play." And he said to me, "Well, why don't you call them up?" and I said, "Please... really?"

Trazana: yeah right...

Tawnya: "Call them up? If it were as simple as that, don't you think all these women, these Black girls in New York City, in Manhattan right now, would be calling them up?" Little did I know that probably all of the Black girls in New York had already called them? (*Laughing*)

Trazana: *(Laughing)* You better believe it. You better believe it.

Tawnya: Anyway, it was kind of a dare. And I had the program in my hand, and it had the New York Shakespeare Festival's number on it. So I went outside, back then they had phone booths - we didn't have cell phones, and I called that number. On the other end of the line a voice said, "New York Shakespeare Festival, Joe Papp speaking."

Trazana: Um, ummm

Tawnya: It took my breath away... because...

Trazana: I know. How does THAT happen?

Tawnya: Yeah! How does Joseph Papp answer the phone?

Trazana: *(says "the phone" at the same time)*

Tawnya: In that moment...

Trazana: *(whispering)* yeah...

Tawnya: I paused, and then I said "Oh." And I got myself together, *(laughing)* really quickly and said, "I'm an actress and I'm in town for a moment and I would like an audition for, *for colored girls.*" And he said, "Can you hold on a moment?" And I said to my friend, "He's probably laughing his ass off right now, because who DOESN'T want an audition for, *for colored girls?*"

Trazana: Of course...

Tawnya: So, a few minutes go by and a voice comes on the phone and says, "Casting, Rosemarie Tichler speaking."

Trazana: Yes...

Tawnya: I was like UH! *(Catches breath)* So I gave her the same spiel. And she said, "Well, have you auditioned before?" and I said, "No." And she said, "Do you dance?" and I said, "Yes." And she said, "Can you come now?" And I said, "YES!!" and I hung up the phone.

Trazana: They were looking to replace someone...

Tawnya: Right in that moment. And when she said, "Can you come now?" I didn't know where I was coming to. I didn't know anything!

Trazana: Right, yeah, right, right.

Tawnya: So I called back, and she was laughing... she said, "You'd like to know where you're coming to right?" *(Huge laugh)*

Trazana: *(huge laugh)* That's funny...

Tawnya: I said, "I don't have my photo, my resume, I'm wearing jeans... I don't have clothes..." She said, "Don't worry about it. Just come down." And she gave me the address of a studio. I don't think it was at The Public, I think it was somewhere else. But it was downtown... "Paula Moss, the choreographer is in town right now and she wants to work with you for a little while." So, I got in a cab. I ran down there.

Trazana: Now was this the same afternoon that you had seen the show?

Tawnya: YES! The same afternoon!

Trazana: My goodness... wow...

Tawnya: So the timing of my call was RIGHT... ON... TIME.

Trazana: Absolutely

Tawnya: I think the timing of my call happened right when they heard from Juhari Azizi that she was leaving the show.

Trazana: OK, so you replaced her?

Tawnya: Yes, at first. Right then they were just looking for someone immediately and apparently they wanted to see someone they hadn't seen before. They had seen a lot of people from previous auditions. And at that point, there was a company in California at the Mark Taper Forum. There was the Broadway Company and I didn't know it, but they were also talking about the First National Tour.

Trazana: Yes...

Tawnya: So anyway, I came down there and Paula and Rosemarie were there. I asked them if I could warm-up and I took off my heels and got on the floor and started stretching and moving. It was funny, they didn't say anything they just let me go, and then all of a sudden Paula says, "OK, I can see you can move (laughing), so just try this." She taught me some steps... and made some corrections... and let me do it. She turned on some music... and let me dance. And then Rosemarie Tichler handed me the sides of "*somebody almost walked off wid alla my stuff,*" and said "OK, Oz Scott, the director, is going to be here on Monday." This was like on a Wednesday. She said, "*We want you to read for him on Monday.*" I asked what time. She said, "*Give us your number and we'll reach you after we arrange it.*" And that's how I got the audition. But, when I looked at the script, at the sides, I had never seen anything like that before. I'd never seen a script like that before.

Trazana: What was different about the *colored girls...* script, Ntozake's writing?

Tawnya: It was Poetic Drama! It was poetry, but it was... I'm an actor. I know what a monologue is. I know what 'types' of monologues are, but I was not familiar with THIS type of monologue.

Trazana: Um hum.

Tawnya: There was no punctuation, no stage direction...

Trazana: Just slashes...

Tawnya: Just slashes, and I couldn't figure out what those slashes meant. Maybe they meant something... I couldn't figure out what they meant.

Trazana: (*chucking*)

Tawnya: And then the language was Black English. It was a language that was not in my study... it was in my cultural continuum, but I had been so far disconnected from my cultural continuum as I had been studying this 'craft' of acting at Carnegie Mellon. I remember Israel, sometimes saying when we were doing *The River Niger*, he would say, "OK, you gotta get rid of that stage standard speech stuff."

Trazana: Um hum, right...



Tawnya: “The words need to be more comfortable in your mouth. You’re sounding like a department store ad.” But Ntozake’s language was IMAGERY. There was a lot of imagery. At least something like *The River Niger* was the ‘so called’ well-made play. Right?

Trazana: Um hum...

Tawnya: That was drama. People spoke in complete sentences and thoughts. *for colored girls* was all over the map. It was feeling. It was emotions. It was WORD imagery and MUSIC. It was music. I was freaking out.

Trazana: And *colored girls*... had the element of ritual...

Tawnya: YES!

Trazana: ... in order to make *colored girls* work on the stage you had to enter into that Ritual. Talk about that a little bit.

Tawnya: You had to enter in... well first of all, in *colored girls*... you really couldn’t “ACT “it, you had to “Be” it.

Trazana: Um hum...

Tawnya: I don’t know... to do *colored girls*, you had to get naked, get to the naked truth. It was UN-masking, it was UN-dressing, not re-MASKING or “make believe.” It was UN-doing all of the things you had been Doing! The “stuff” you worked on for years in acting school.

Trazana: Right...

Tawnya: So it was exactly the opposite, it was counterintuitive to the things that I’d been working on in conservatory training.

Trazana: OK

Tawnya: So that was what was so... what do I want to say... so DISARMING about it, and that’s why it was so... Why I was so afraid...

Trazana: I was going to say was it difficult for you, at first to embrace it, to get inside of it?

Tawnya: Because I didn’t want to IMITATE what I had seen. I could imitate. Like, I could have just plain imitated. But the woman who did “*somebody almost walked off wid alla my stuff*” ...

Trazana: That was Paula Moss.

Tawnya: That was not me? I did not want to be doing an imitation of something...

Trazana: Right, right...

Tawnya: So I think that I was afraid I was going to fail. I didn’t have the appropriate knowledge, experience, content, to bring to this work... to give it what it needed. What am I going to do? I have an audition with a BROADWAY DIRECTOR, and I don’t know what I’m doing. And I just got my BFA degree from Carnegie Mellon. I’m supposed to know what I’m doing...

Trazana: (*Chuckling.*)

Tawnya: ... and I don’t? So I called up one of my acting teachers, and I was hyperventilating... (*Laughing*) She talked me off the ledge and told me to come over. We had coffee, and she said,

“Let’s treat it like Shakespeare.” And the thing is, when she said that, I was like OH, OH, I can do that.

Trazana: Um hum...

Tawnya: I can treat it like Shakespeare! I know how to do Shakespeare! (*Chuckling.*)

Trazana: Right, right, right...

Tawnya: So let me treat it like Shakespeare. And that’s what I did. Literally Shakespeare is poetic drama, and it also has no stage directions except exit. EXEUNT!

Trazana: EXEUNT! (*Laughing.*)

Tawnya: No punctuation, it just goes...

Trazana: Yes.

Tawnya: The words are there on the page... it’s got this rhythm... iambic pentameter... this word imagery... very much like, *for colored girls*... So when I started to put it in the context of something I knew, like that, I started to get more of a handle on it. Ultimately, I worked on the piece and did it for Oz Scott on that Monday. Two days later they asked me to be in the company. They told me, basically, that someone had just left ... and I called at ‘THE EXACT MOMENT’ when they were thinking they needed a replacement, and the timing was all... you know.

Trazana: Right, right, right.

Tawnya: But all I could think about in that moment, was... why did I need to defer to Shakespeare in order to do a piece that was about me? And Shakespeare had been so foreign to me not so very long ago. Then I said, something’s wrong with this picture... something is WRONG with this picture...

Coming into that company of *for colored girls* with all of these, including your illustrious self, these superstar women... a Tony Award winning actor... was quite humbling and overwhelming. And the ease with which YOU handled the work, as compared to the difficulty that I had was like... this dichotomous opposition... this gulf. Why? Why? She can do this so easily, why am I having all these struggles?

Trazana: (*Chuckling.*) Right, right.

Tawnya: So, I decided right then that you, (Traz), were the ONE I was going to study. All of the women were wonderful. All of the pieces are wonderful. They’re very unique and specific to each actor’s strengths. Oz was very good at putting the right person with the right piece...

Trazana: Yes, he was.

Tawnya: ... which I didn’t really fully appreciate until much later, but he was very, very, very good with that. Even with all that said, I noticed that Trazana Beverley does this as if she’s eating ice cream.

Trazana: (*Laughing.*)

Tawnya: Like it’s second nature. I want what I do to be like THAT. Not that I wanted to be Trazana Beverley, I wanted to be who I was, but I wanted to... not be so self-conscious about my relationship to the work. That was the beginning of my journey.

Trazana: Um hum.

Tawnya: I had the honor and the privilege to be selected, because not everyone was...

Trazana: No indeed. That's true.

Tawnya: So I had to get busy making it... doing the work and making it work for who I was.

Trazana: You know, just to chime in for a minute... and maybe to be a little spontaneous with you. I came into the *colored girls* project at its inception, before it became *for colored girls*...

Tawnya: Right.

Trazana: ... before it got all of its notoriety. And sometimes you don't know enough to be afraid.

Tawnya: Yes. I wish that was me... but (*Laughing.*)

Trazana: You just take it on... as though you're like a kid running down the hall. You just run down the hall with a gift in your hand and say, "Hey Mama, look what I got!" You just play with it. As the piece began to grow into the world and assume this iconic image...

Tawnya: And it was!

Trazana: ...it just became this Giant... this Queen in literature. There we were, these girls, these young actresses, who were basically having a good time... and exploring... and just happy to be working.

Tawnya: Yes.

Trazana: So, obviously you said it was graduate school, and I'm assuming that on one hand you're looking at technique...

Tawnya: Yes.

Trazana: Because you did have to make it work well. And, that is something that I had, and still have. I have technique. But obviously the material started to open up something more in you, and hearing those words, having to embody those words emotionally, started to turn some more wheels in your head about who you were as a young Black actress/artist. And, obviously you started to have some kind of a vision of something beyond the play and what it meant to you as an actress.

You call it 'Ritual Poetic Drama,' and now you're dealing with *for colored girls*, which was ritual, which was poetry, which was BLACK. But clearly it tapped into you... it opened up something in you that if we go back to Al Freeman, if we go back to Israel Hicks, we go back to your early beginnings...

Tawnya: Um hum.

Trazana: ...and how these mentors are encouraging you, something is coming at you. Something is saying "open up, open up, open up."

Tawnya: Yes!

Trazana: And then you come to a vision of something that is YOURS. That you feel compelled to develop. When did that happen?

Tawnya: I feel like what I discovered in the *colored girls* journey, or began to discover I should say because it was a long process. It wasn't like 'AH HAH.' It was revealing itself over time. Like

you said, we were on stage every night. Twice on Saturday and twice on Sunday with this piece that we LIVED OUT, on the stage with nothing but a dress, some underwear and bare feet.

Trazana: That's right...

Tawnya: No props... no set to speak of... a floor, a shiny floor, some lights, and US. It was raw. I think the thing I want to say is I started to discover my authentic self. I recognized that although there might have been people who were in *for colored girls*, because there were so many companies of it ultimately, who pretended or who imitated, I realized that I could not do that show without authenticity. Which meant the feelings I was having on the stage were real. They were authentic in the moment that they were occurring. It was a moment-to-moment reality. I was not having an out-of-body experience. I had to be fully present in my body in order for it to work. I felt exposed, and naked, and truthful, and both feet on the ground --- COVERING the ground we stood on, and allowing people to see me, myself, fully present--- full of the flaws... the human condition... The weakness as well as the strength... this kind of uncovering of taking on the responsibility for my story, my journey. I think that the discovery of my authentic voice made me realize how inauthentic I had been. In acting school for all of those years that I was studying... that what I was doing was... I was imitating something instead of BEING something. And *colored girls* FORCED me to BE rather than to imitate. *colored girls* forced me to create real moments on stage. There was no one else that I could copy in that. I had to find it for myself. Often people who play Blanche DuBois try to be Vivian Leigh. I realized that even if I played Blanche DuBois, I had to find Blanche DuBois in me. I couldn't copy something.

Trazana: True.

Tawnya: And so I felt like my training was deficient. Because it didn't probe deep enough into who I was, it didn't value who I was. It didn't ask the questions that needed to be asked about who I WAS as a person inside of my cultural continuum, as an artist, so that I could bring the fullness of myself to the art I create.

Trazana: So we are both acting teachers, and we've taught ...

Tawnya: Does that make sense?

Trazana: Completely! So, my question is, we work with young white actors, black actors, with actors of every color and culture. You talk about this authenticity of probing deeper into who you are? Do you think that the professional schools that are teaching acting, that have these integrated classes ... that they are lacking something that YOU have decided YOU, as a teacher and as a director and as a theorist in the theatre, want to bring to the Black actor in helping them to mature and develop their craft? You talk about this DEEPER self. Most acting schools, or shall I say, it's a rare acting school, it's a rare program, that really probes the Black student for who they are authentically. Most barely acknowledge you are a BLACK man. You are a BLACK woman who is attempting to learn the craft... acting, like any other actor.

Tawnya: Yes.

Trazana: What are your thoughts around that?

Tawnya: Most of us, and you also went to acting school. [Most of us] were encouraged to leave our Blackness outside of the studio space. We were encouraged to become 'every man,' 'every woman.' We were told to be this kind of ... universal human without race or ethnicity. I wouldn't say that sexuality wasn't a part of it too. I mean we were female or we were male, and that's also a binary. That also can be problematic.

Trazana: Yes, it can.

Tawnya: But we were encouraged to come in and be human. Which I personally feel is like painting everything vanilla. I feel like I am MORE. I am human, but I am more than that. And where I get my cracks and crevices, my pits and my valleys, my tones and textures... the canvas... the landscape that is painted on... that canvas has EVERYTHING to do with me being a Black Woman, and the experiences of growing into that, and ALL that encompasses. And for me to leave that “outside” and become some kind of nondescript human being, some blank canvas... that’s a phrase that’s used in actor training... becoming the ‘blank canvas’ and having to put the character on top of that...

Trazana: Right, right.

Tawnya: ...I think was counterproductive, and IS counterproductive to actor training and particularly for Black, Latin, Asian, people who are connected to their cultural continuum. For our purposes here, we focus particularly on Black Artists in America, because of our historic legacy in this country. How we came to be here, and what was done to us as we fought and resisted and worked towards our liberation... that, THAT is part of our cultural continuum. And that is a part of the palette that we use to PAINT with. For somebody to take that away from me, or to encourage me not to think about it, or use it, or bring it to the table... is basically asking me to get in the game, or get in the fight with one arm tied behind my back...

Trazana: Right, right, right.

Tawnya: ... or legs bound, or something... I think that Black artists, particularly ACTORS, particularly acting students, are asked to do that ALL the time. I think dancers have a similar experience, which is why we now have the Alvin Ailey Company and the Dance Theatre of Harlem. The BALLET is more... in those companies it is not just the classic ballet it’s MORE than that.

Trazana: That’s why Arthur Mitchell created...

Tawnya: Exactly!

Trazana: Because they told him that he couldn’t...

Tawnya: Exactly!

Trazana: ... that a Black man couldn’t dance ballet. And he said, of course we can, we dance it as Black people!

Tawnya: That’s right. And THAT is what makes them dynamic. That is why I have a spiritual experience when I see the Dance Theatre of Harlem. I’m watching the beauty of the technique and the dance, but I’m watching MORE than that. And I feel like for us, as performing artists and students of the craft, we are missing something when we don’t bring our authentic selves as a part of the journey that we go on.

Trazana: Now Tawnya, we have a lot of Black plays written by wonderful Black playwrights, but you developed very, very special material. You developed very original material to speak to what you were talking about the black actor really discovering and dealing with who they are culturally, emotionally, physically, and spiritually. Tell a little bit about that, and you also have a company...

Tawnya: Ntozake said, “You just write.” Theatre stories... theatre is life. We all have stories to tell, and yes, there are wonderful Black plays... and in order to illuminate those plays we have to bring all of ourselves to those plays. I can’t come to a play like *Flyin’ West* or *Intimate Apparel* and bring my classical training alone, which is the ‘form,’ without bringing the content of myself. That content has to do with all my Blackness, my cultural continuum, and my history. I have got to add that to the seasoning of creating. I’ve found that it’s very important to learn to tell YOUR story.

To figure out the ‘rites of passage’ moments in your own personal journey that make you who you are... that have broken you, and that you have traveled through, been transformed by and have overcome... that you have gotten REVELATION from... and “Became” because of. And so, I help facilitate a process by which actors CAN create pieces, poetic pieces, stories, poetic drama, even songs or movement pieces, out of these ‘rites of passage’ moments in their own personal journey... that connect them, intimately to this kind of palette of experience, of emotion, of content. That content, those stories that are inside of the artist...these, are the fuel of our creative genius.

Trazana: So define this ‘rite of passage.’ Explain that a little bit.

Tawnya: I consider a ‘rite of passage’ moment; something that occurs in your life’s journey, in the continuum of your life, that changes you forever. A “rite of passage” is an experience that PROFOUNDLY affects how you see things, how you contextualize things. It’s a moment or an event that causes you to change...you cannot look at those moments the same as you once did AFTER the “rite of passage” moment, you are transformed.

Trazana: OK.

Tawnya: That’s a rite of passage. There are rites of passage moments that happen culturally like losing your virginity, like getting your driver’s license, graduating from high school. Those are communal, or common rites of passage moments. But there are PERSONAL rites of passage moments that go way beyond those moments to the core of your being.

Trazana: Yes...

Tawnya: Like for me, one of them would be when I, as a very young teenager, chose not to use drugs ... I was going to a school where all the kids used drugs. It wasn’t about me judging them; I just made a decision and did not choose to do drugs at that time in my life...(chuckling). So it was a very clear decision. I went to a party. I came home... my mother always waited up for me... she asked me how the party was... I said, “Fine.” I went to bed. The next day, in the morning very early... it was a Saturday morning... yes 7:00am on a Saturday, my door flies open, my mother burst in. It was as if the COPS were busting the door down... it startled me. She rips the covers off of me, so I’m laying bare in the bed, and then she points her finger at me and she says, “I want to know what you’ve been taking and where’d you get it from?” and I said, “Nothing.” At first I thought I was dreaming.

Trazana: *(Laughing.)*

Tawnya: I thought it was a nightmare. I mean I had made this conscious decision and I hadn’t been doing anything. And then she pointed again and she said, “I want to know who gave it to you; who did you get it from? I’m gonna find out anyway so you might as well come clean.” And I said, “I am clean.” And then she just stared at me, turned around and before she left the room, turned back, pointed her finger at me and said, “Liar” and left the room. I was devastated. I started crying. I couldn’t believe that I was telling the truth and she didn’t believe me.

Trazana: Yes...

Tawnya: And so in that moment I realized that there was a story that she wanted me to tell that I wasn’t telling. She had something that was already in her mind that she wanted me to say. I wasn’t telling that story and therefore the story that I was telling was not true.

Trazana: Could not be true.

Tawnya: Could not be true. And so it warped my sense of the truth and the lie. I realized that our justice system is built like that. You get twelve people to believe somebody is guilty... and they're guilty, even if they're not guilty. You get twelve people to say someone is not guilty... and they're not guilty! Either way it doesn't matter what is actually true. It's the story they want you to tell.

Trazana: Who can make the best argument?

Tawnya: Who can make the best story? So in that moment, I was thirteen, and in that moment I became a liar. I felt like it was easier to lie and tell the story they wanted to hear than to actually deal with the truth.

Trazana: My goodness.

Tawnya: So, that's a "rite of passage" moment. In that moment, my perception was TOTALLY altered, and I literally believed it was better to just make stuff up. Until I became a young adult and it was so TIRING, that I had another epiphany... you know what... I'm telling the truth, and if you can't handle the truth then that's your problem not mine, because I'm tired of carrying all of this fake... lack of authenticity in my spirit. It's like baggage I'm carrying. I wanna be free. For me, that was a major rite of passage moment. And I wrote a piece about that. It was a cycle. That's part of the work--- Life, Death and Transformation.

Trazana: OK.

Tawnya: You know, James Baldwin says, *"A story is impelled by the necessity to reveal itself. A story can have nothing to hide, at least not intentionally. There is no resolution to a story. The aim of a story is revelation, with what we make of the questions with which the story leaves us. Plot, on the other hand, answers all of the questions it pretends to pose."*

Trazana: Um hum, um hum.

Tawnya: Like a lawyer not asking a question unless they already know the answer. My Mother was using plot. She had an answer she wanted me to say and I wasn't saying it. It wasn't a story, it was a plot.

This work, poetic drama, Ritual Poetic Drama, because it deals with an altered state of consciousness, because it deals with the truth and the authenticity of the story and this idea of REVELATION... of CHANGE... something has to CHANGE... because of the elements that the story bears witness to.

Trazana: Now, what makes this uniquely Black?

Tawnya: I don't think that it's necessarily *uniquely* Black; it's the methodology that I use in order to get to the story which is done through the use of the drum... the drum being the heart beat, the baseline, the truth. And this "trance-like" altered state of consciousness whereby the essential story, the indigenous origins of story that come from the continent are about life, death and transformation. The process is rooted ...within the African Continuum---The knowledge that with every sunset there will be a sunrise. That Life has a cycle of being. And Death is as much a part of that cycle as Life is. I don't believe that the African Continuum is the only indigenous culture that believes this. I think it's in ALL indigenous cultures. Being a Black woman and being uniquely and inherently connected to the cultural continuum of Africa, is where I draw the tenets of the methodology that I use... The idea of community... The idea of Ritual... The idea of "witness." The idea of the community facilitating the journey much like a midwife facilitates the birth of a child...

Trazana: Um, um um...

Tawnya: ... facilitating the story coming forth. I think that's what makes it uniquely Black or African, in the way that the 'well made play' and 'the plot' is uniquely Western European. I'm not saying one is superior or better than the other. They're different. I have found that this idea of transformation, of revelation, of connection to your emotional, psycho, physical core has helped a lot of young actors, black/white and other. The process has helped them connect with their authentic self. When they can, in front of witnesses, feel an authentic emotion...

Trazana: Um hum, um hum.

Tawnya: THAT is a revelation to them. This idea of public privacy is a concept that we deal with on the stage ---That we are being PRIVATE in public.

Trazana: Yes, yes, yes.

Tawnya: But, often we learn techniques that kind of 'fake it 'til you make it' kind of stuff.

Trazana: Camouflage.

Tawnya: Yes, and this process, challenges the artist's ability to do that. The community is present supporting you through it... There's this 'AH HAH' moment, this revelation for these young artists. When these feelings come out of them, they are impelled. The story has to come out. It MUST be told.

Trazana: In your chapter you speak of your journey to Africa. How has that helped embolden you, helped you develop this even further? Or, did you find that it was what you expected... what you didn't find? What were your challenges?

Tawnya: The first time I went to Africa I expected... I was a scholar... I was taking notes... I was writing... and I didn't expect to have my own spiritual experience. I was bringing other people... I was outside of myself. I was playing 'the role' of... But, when I... I had a spiritual experience when I went to the Slave Castles and I went through what they call, "The Door of No Return."

Trazana: Yes, I've seen it on TV.

Tawnya: So I went through a narrow opening of that door... I could FEEL the spirits in that place.

Trazana: I bet you could, I bet you could... yes...

Tawnya: And then I came BACK. You see, The Door of No Return is supposed to be a door you go through, but NEVER return from. So, the act of coming back through that door, made my ancestors sing....

Trazana: UMMMM...

Tawnya: It's like... I CAME BACK! I didn't just go... I came back. I am They. They are Me. And THAT was extraordinary... and when that happened, it's as if ...the blood just went out of my body and I just fell to the ground. And I was on the stone. And I was just weeping, on the stones. I thought I was weeping because they were weeping, but it was a weeping of JOY. It was a weeping of recognition. It was a weeping of revelation. It wasn't a weeping of sorrow. It wasn't a weeping of loss. It was a weeping of GAIN.

Trazana: Um, um, yeah...



Tawnya: I realized this idea of ‘Sankofa,’ this idea of going back to GET IT... the things that were lost, taken, stolen, or forgotten... so that you can become whole. I really believe that within the methodology of the training of actors... one of the things that has been missing is the connection to the SPIRIT... training must address the spirit of the actor. We train the mind, we train the body, we train the voice, we train the intellect, but we leave out a SPIRIT!

Trazana: I agree with you.

Tawnya: This is an EXTREMELY important part, because it’s who we are.

Trazana: That’s right.

Tawnya: It’s our AUTHENTIC SELF. Otherwise we’re just a shell. It’s like watching somebody do a wonderful dance, they do all the steps perfectly, but there’s no spirit to it. There’s no CONTENT... it’s only form. The form may be perfect, it may be good, but there’s something missing, ...they are missing something important. That sort of gave me that AH HAH moment about actor training, in that SOMETHING is missing. And again, I come back to Ntozake in that final piece in *for colored girls* when it says, “I was missing something.”

Trazana: Yes.

Tawnya: I was missing something very important. And, it made me start to look at this idea of the dramatic form, the African perspective of the dramatic form, and what was its purpose? WHY did we have it? What was it supposed to do in culture, in society? Because entertainment was only a very small part of what it was supposed to do. It made me start looking at how arts are imbedded and integrated into the community and the culture in African society. They don’t do ANYTHING without the Arts. Things like building dedications, community center openings, hospital openings... the government. There is ALWAYS song, and music, and poetry, and dance, and there’s always arts and culture as a part of everything they do. There’s a need and a purpose for it within the culture. Not only that, EVERYBODY participates. So, it’s not just about the people who can afford to buy the ticket. It’s a COMMUNITY participatory event whenever it happens. I want to translate that over in the United States. I want that. I want our arts and culture to be so embedded and engrained in everything that we do, that it is an expression of who we are. That makes it African. That makes the Afro-centricity of it.

Trazana: Right.

Tawnya: That’s what started all of the juices flowing.... I need to go back. I need to go back to the dramatic form, where it came from, why it started, what it was for? And start studying that and then connect to those origins and build on that continuum from THOSE shores to THESE.

Trazana: Yes, yes, yes.

Tawnya: And that’s where the work... that’s how the study of the work began and how I started to use some tools inspired by that study in the classroom/studio space. To facilitate the journey, I call it ‘Journeying,’ the ‘Rites of Passage’ journeys that these students take where they’re in an altered state of consciousness because I’m facilitating that journey. I’m facilitating the initiating moment. What’s the moment? I take them back in time to the specific age, and there’s a moment, something. Some “event” that occurred. What are you feeling in that specific moment? What’s the primary emotion? And then give that emotion a movement so that you’re physicalizing it.

Trazana: In working with an actor this way, because you are tapping into some very deep moments and emotions in the human being, have you ever run up against a situation where you’ve tapped into something that’s really very emotionally traumatic for that person and it became very overwhelming, and how did you handle that?

Tawnya: There've been MANY times when it has been overwhelming. The rites of passage can be all kinds of things. And we don't know what they're going to be. They're not planned. They are impelled. They just come.

Trazana: Pop up!

Tawnya: I can tell you, we don't just jump into this. I don't get a new group of people and just go right into this work. There's a process of getting to know one another. There are rituals that we perform in the getting to know one another. We don't generally go into these individual journeys for several weeks.

Trazana: OK.

Tawnya: It's not an immediate thing...there has to be a level of trust. And we also have to create a community where everyone trusts everyone. We have to sign on to the process. What happens in the circle stays in the circle. We do not talk about other people's stories.

Trazana: WOW...

Tawnya: We do not have the right to share anyone's story. We have to create... there are certain ways of *being* and *knowing*. We must create this sacred space as a community before we can do what I just explained. And then the overarching guide, or principle, is that there will be revelation and change and we do the process as a cycle. So, whatever you're going into, you're going to come out of. You're not going to stay anywhere. And afterwards, you write it down, and then you speak it out loud in a loud voice with strong emotion... you let it out. Then we have a cooling down period where there are people taking care of those who went on a journey. It's kind of like what midwives and doula's do during labor and delivery.

Trazana: Um hum.

Tawnya: This is not therapy. People need to know that. It may be therapeutic, it may be HEALTH-FULL, but it's not designed or meant to take the place of therapy. There are people that need to go and talk to someone; a professional, medical professionals about what has come up for them. I have names of mental healthcare providers to give to people as needed. The goal of the work, and why we are doing it, keeps the outcomes focused. I've been using this practice for twenty-five years now. The process ... it is about revelation...reveal-ation... Enabling the student/artist to find their authentic voice and recognize the potency of their own story. It has a very empowering outcome for the artist(s) ...to "Cover the ground they stand on."

Trazana: Um hum, Um hum.

Tawnya: I have never had a situation that we were not able to deal with.

Trazana: The Conciliation Project, is that born out of the use of Poetic Ritual?

Tawnya: YES!

Trazana: Talk about that!

Tawnya: That Company was born out of a class project. I didn't intend to start a theatre company. This *journeying* is a wonderful tool to help facilitate the process of getting the story out onto the page. What we wanted to do was use the process to actually devise a new piece of theatre. A work that was collectively authored, that had a theme, and we chose Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* as the basis; the text that we were going to do the devising work from.

Trazana: You're using the Ritual Poetic form to create...?

Tawnya: To create... to devise the plays, because they're all collectively authored. We go through this research and writing process... It usually takes about 4-6 months, altogether, to create a play.

Trazana: So, before we wrap up, is there anything you would like to add to the conversation that I have not spoken to?

Tawnya: The journey, the *colored girls*... journey, is clearly a "Rite of Passage" moment in my life.

Trazana: Yes.

Tawnya: And it clearly changed the course of my life.

Trazana: Yes.

Tawnya: My ART... and my VISION. It is what I hope will be the future. Because I truly believe that this methodology, the idea of Rites of Passage, of Ritual Poetic Drama, of devised work helps the artist to reveal their authentic self and speak in their authentic voice... *Covering the Ground* on which they stand. We need more potent and powerful artists. We need MORE *Colored Girls*. We need MORE of that kind of revolutionary work.

Trazana: I think that, historically, when we look at the different canons of play literature, it will be interesting to look at the plays and the forms that have come together, that have CHANGED a style of acting or methodology. Because you know, they don't come along often. But they do come. And certainly *for colored girls* was one of those. It's an American Classic offering on MANY levels...

Tawnya: ...and oh how many artists it has inspired.

Trazana: Indeed, indeed.

Transcribed by Andrienne Wilson, the Outreach Coordinator for The Conciliation Project in Richmond, VA.

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**Trazana Beverley.** Winner of the distinguish Tony Award for her performance in the Broadway show "*For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide / When The Rainbow Is Enuf*" Trazana Beverley, has since created a unique signature in the American Theater. She is also a talented director, singer, acting teacher and writer. Trazana, is a graduate of New York University Tisch School for the Arts where she studied under Lloyd Richards, Peter Kass, Omar Shapli, Kristin Linklater and the great Polish director, Jersey Grotowsky. Among highlights of her distinguished acting and directing career are- *On Stage: Mother Courage; A Raisin In The Sun; Fly'n West; Peer Gynt; Constant Star; Crowns; The Nacirema Society; Macbeth; Medea, and King Lear ( as a man )*. In film: *Beloved (starring, Oprah Winfrey); Resurrection; Margaret and the Saturday Night Ladies (starring, Ellen Burstein) and T.V. series- Carolina Skeletons*. Her singing and writing skills have been displayed in her one woman show "*The Spirit Moves*"; and recently, "*Mable Madness*"- the dramatic story with music about the life of the famous cabaret chanteuse, *Mable Mercer*. Highlights of her directing credits include: *Spell#7, Native Son, For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide / When The Rainbow Is Enuf, In The Blood, From The Mississippi Delta, Pecong. The Trojan Woman , Salome, Yellowman , The Bluest Eye, Blue Door, Mask in The Mirror – an Opera*. And most recently a female production of, Shakespeare's "*Othello*." Trazana is currently on the guest directing drama faculty of the Juilliard School in New York City. Her acting work is sighted in: *American Theater Magazine* and *Towards A Poor Theater* (Simon & Shuster). Among other distinguished awards are; *Mademoiselle Woman Of The Year, The Audelco Recognition Award and The Theater World Award*. She has received two Citizen's Citations for her contribution to the American Stage as a distinguished citizen of Baltimore, MD. She has also been recognized by the New York Senate and the New York State Assembly for her artistic contributions to the community. Ms. Beverley is an honorary member of the New York State Assembly.

**Tawnya Pettiford-Wates**, Ph.D. is Associate Professor of Graduate Pedagogy in Acting and Directing at Virginia Commonwealth University, and the Artistic Director and Founder of The Conciliation Project, a social justice theatre company whose mission is “*To promote through active and challenging dramatic work open and honest dialogue about racism and oppression in America in order to repair its damaging legacy.*” [www.theconciliationproject.org](http://www.theconciliationproject.org). Tawnya is a playwright, director, actor, poet, writer/scholar-activist and teacher. She has appeared in the New York Shakespeare Festival’s production of *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide / When The Rainbow Is Enuf* in both the national and international touring companies. Her television, film, industrial, voice over and commercial credits are extensive. Dr. Pettiford-Wates is a contributing author in *Black Acting Methods: Critical Approaches*, edited by Sharrell D. Luckett with Tia Shaffer and *Multiethnic American Literatures: Essays for Teaching Context and Culture*, edited by Helane Adams Androne, Ph.D.