

To Compromise or Not Compromise? That is the Question: Eugene Lee and Clinnesha D. Sibley in Conversation

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In reference to Offering 7 – “Remembering, rewriting, and re-imagining:
Afrocentric approaches to directing new works for the theatre”
by Clinnesha Sibley in *Black Acting Methods: Critical Approaches*

Abstract:

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

Introduction

Every time I submitted work to Texas State University’s Black and Latino Playwrights Conference, I would get a personal reply from the artistic director, Eugene Lee, thanking me for my submission. He would conclude his message with something like, “If you have any questions, just holler.” The back-and-forth transactions felt authentic enough for me to share my Black Acting Methods chapter, “Remembering, Rewriting and Reimagining: Afrocentric Approaches to Directing New Work for the Theatre.” When he agreed to dialogue with me about the critical approach I’d written about, I knew this amazing actor/wordsmith who had made significant contributions to black film and theatre would also help me better understand aspects of my field that I was struggling with at the time. As the only black tenure-track professor in a predominantly white theatre department, I was up to my neck in artistic compromises and had begun embracing a newfound self-awareness. I was well on my way to earning my “woke badge,” when someone I admired in the field who worked with August Wilson, Kenny Leon, and grew up with the N.E.C. boiled the roux down to a simmering decree: compromise. Our conversation points to this idea that [in some, not all circumstances] it is okay to compromise with our non-black colleagues, which calls for more of a hybrid method [using Eurocentric and Afrocentric approaches to finding a play] in theatre collaborations. I wrestled with that pearl-of-wisdom for the duration of my chapter writing. Was the compromising concept hypocritical? Constantly looking back at and reflecting on my organic reaction to his idea—a single, loaded response: “Hmmm,” I uttered. And now, more than two years later, the uncertainty is still-kinda-there. How does one earn the “woke badge” if compromise is the goal? I couldn’t admit to this revolutionary at the time of the interview that I didn’t want to compromise and that I thought it was counterproductive. He had invested time in me. He was a hero and not one who ego trips. I couldn’t muster up the boldness and honesty to say, “To hell with compromising! Resist!” I’m

not sure if it was my youth, gender, or both in that moment, that kept me so reserved. I matured into the thought that by developing and showcasing the work of Black and Latino playwrights from across the country and helping them to hone their craft, Eugene Lee was indeed resisting. Some people write their way in to being “woke” and some people live awakened. As the rapper Common put it in the song Glory, “It takes the wisdom of the elders and young peoples’ energy.”

Eugene: Yeah. This whole thing is gonna open a can of worms. There are some questions. I circled a bunch of words because we’re writers and we know the word is where it is.

Clinessha: That’s right.

Eugene: There is a need. There is a desperate need. I mean we talked the other day about some of my encounters in Texas with the Playwrights Conference and the African-American students who just have minimal insight of who they are and... that’s really kind of distressing to me. So the need for this is real. Is this not just for black artists?

Clinessha: It’s not because we’re still trying to cultivate a large number of us. You know, I have worked with white directors, white dramaturgs and, you know, I’ve worked with people who don’t necessarily own the black experience but they’re in tune enough to gather an appreciation for our stories, our narrative. And so, because I know that there can be a genuine encounter with white artists, I feel inclined to say this is not just for black people. This is for anyone who wants to and is committed to telling black stories.

Eugene: The other part of that, for me, is...when it’s not in your blood, can white theatre artists benefit from this approach. Can they even adopt this approach? Is it even accessible to them? Can it be infused in their blood I guess is the question.

Clinessha: You know it’s interesting. I still think about that as I mull over this chapter and this research because the way I think about it is...the way white theatre artists and practitioners have commercialized the new play development process has made me really believe that it was the “normal way” to work on a new play.

Eugene: Or the only way.

Clinessha: The only way. For me, when I’m engaged commercially in new work, it still feels like I’m alienated. It still feels like there is something in me that I cannot get from or out of the process. There will be black actors, but for the most part, I—we—find ourselves becoming a part of *their* process. Or you know, doing it their way. So in a way, I have subscribed to the Eurocentric way of finding a play. I’ve done that and...I think that Eurocentric theatre artists, if they want to create ritual, if they’re interested in what it really means to create the black experience and make it theatrical, then I believe they, alone, could embrace parts of these procedures that I’m writing about. But there has to be someone who is Afrocentric. There has to be someone black involved and my feeling is that it has to be a playwright. I do think there is a way to adopt these procedures—these steps—for finding a play even when black people are in the minority. The genuine interest has to be there. Now, as a white theatre artist, you may not be able to participate in one of the steps and feel like you have a full understanding of black culture because in a way I think that’s impossible. Sometimes I don’t even have a full understanding. But I

do think we can move forward with a genuine appreciation and a commitment to what is real. Real struggle. A real identity issue as it relates to the black person. So I do think anyone can take the ideas of this chapter, apply it to a process and have an enriching experience, but there needs to be someone involved who is a part of the lived reality.

Eugene: A kindred spirit.

Clinnesha: Absolutely.

Eugene: And what your chapter speaks to is creating a hybrid. Creating a default and making it a hybrid, in a sense. Question here and I don't want to be too tangential. Are there listable fundamentals or basics to achieving Afrocentric approaches? Are there listable courses of action? Are there identifiable and quantifiable exercises that will be spelled out?

Clinnesha: Yes. And I hope the attempt was worth it. Some of the listables involve revisiting this idea of an analysis and how we analyze our plays and our characters. You send an actor away to analyze themselves as a character and there are, you know, certain models that we use and those tend to be mostly Eurocentric. One of the things I'm doing in this chapter is presenting a new model for an analysis and it's called an ancestral analysis. So it forces the actors to get to the root of their identity.

Eugene: Their identity or the characters'?

Clinnesha: Both I think. But mostly that of the character. Because a large part of our character development in black theatre has a lot to do with, or should have a lot to do with, where we are and how free we are in terms of what and who we identify with. And so, another thing that's common among black people is our complex basics. My name. My African name and the customs associated with my tribe. Many of us go our entire lives with that being a mystery. The ancestral analysis allows the actor in the play to take their character and root him or her out. If their last name belonged to a white man that's something we have to spell out, you know, that becomes a part of my analytical self. It's crazy because when I'm teaching or when I have students that bring in their character analysis and the first item on the analysis is your name, who are you—well, that's a little unique for a character who identifies as black. One of the listables is a revisiting of the analytical steps. Creating an inner life that is specific to being black. Some other listables include establishing a sense of community among the creative team. Oral tradition, for example, is one of the listables and being able to achieve that. One of the things I'm encouraging artists to do is get around a table with some food. The oral tradition surrounding table fellowship is a wonderful opportunity for storytelling and the evoking of similar experiences. And we can find a play through that. We can develop a consensus about something or find something that only one of us has experienced.

Eugene: And all of these things that you're talking about contribute to helping establish something that I call ensemble. And it's very interesting to me that when I really learned that word was with *The Negro Ensemble Company*. I learned a whole new acting style than from my experience working at the NEC. I remember working on *Home* by Samm-Art Williams. I had never seen a white play with that style. Incorporating conventions like bending time, narrators, non-linear structures—and as you mention, the interdisciplinary: music, art, media, dance, poetry. The style of addressing the audience, but not addressing the audience; addressing

something bigger than the audience. It's a presentational style that is akin to the classics, but it is a hybrid.

Clinnesha: *Home* is a good example. One of the listables emphasizes the open mic poetry experience. That's a kind of event that I encourage artistic teams and ensembles to attend and participate in things like that—non-linear experiences, word power, and being able to incorporate music/songs into the narratives. The call and response in both open mic settings and in church, southern black church experiences, putting yourself in environments that are infused with afrocentric elements.

Eugene: And there are rituals in the theatre. For example, the circle-start of a rehearsal or performance. It is, from my experience, a *very* afrocentric or African theatre phenomenon. I've worked with white theatre companies and we don't ever pull all the wagons into a circle. Everybody's off doing their own thing. I'm just responding to your listables in terms of nuts and bolts, things that contribute and help to enhance that afrocentric approach. It's a course of action. I'm reminded of Kenny Leon who, at the end of the day, brings us together. We hold hands in a circle and everybody contributes something positive. Sometimes it's just a line from the play. Sometimes it's just a discovery that was made that day. And I don't know if that happens in other non-African American rehearsal processes.

Clinnesha: Thank you for mentioning encircling and the things that come out of that type of bonding. I don't know if a lot of white theatre practitioners realize that they are engaged in ritual when they are doing warm up exercises, you know, *in the circle*. I don't know if it dawns on them that it's very afrocentric and they're sort of welcoming that spirit into their process. I'm reminded of one of my experiences when there were black and white theatre artists involved and I did feel an afrocentric spirit within the leadership—the director—the director has so much power. In this particular experience, the director wanted to have a spiritual moment with the ensemble and the director created that circle and we held hands and we did pray. We did meditate. This female director also identified as a Native American, so...yeah...those are practices that seem culturally unique. Theatre as a spiritual practice. We are developing this play and it's about us, but really, it's about that aunt that I grew up with and in a way this play is very much inspired by her and so there is a link to an absent other. That spirit is present and we give prominence to that. I'm not suggesting that there is a complete absence of work that might be traditional or might be a part of an actor's training because if it works for you, honor it. What I'm suggesting is that we give prominence to the spiritual and the afrocentric bonding opportunities that can help us find a play or a character just as strongly as figuring out their need or objective. And so, to me, it comes down to what we're most committed to.

Eugene: So, compromise is the default.

Clinnesha: Hmm.

Eugene: It seems.

Clinnesha: That's good.

Eugene: Does that make sense?

Clinnesha: Compromise. Absolutely. I think we have to start customizing our experiences more.

Eugene: That's the hybrid thing I was talking about earlier. That's what makes this so rich. The circle. The style. We even sing in our circle sometimes. What about the reasons black writers are writing white characters and their feeling compelled to write white characters? Otherwise, they feel the play won't get produced.

Clinnesha: I know, right. That's crazy.

Eugene: It's crazy for me to hear a young person--*a graduate student*—come into a writing program and say something like that.

Clinnesha: But where is that coming from? It's very real to them.

Eugene: Very real to them. And it's scary but it leads to my next point about the lack of afrocentric goals among the writers. Is that self-hate? Is that denial?

Clinnesha: I think it's more desperation.

Eugene: You know what the historical term is for that...bamboozled.

Clinnesha: Bamboozled. I also think it's a resource thing. Access and resources. It may be that it's a self-hatred thing or that black theatre artists don't believe that they, alone, are enough. That their experiences are enough. Their truth is enough. It could be that they are in academic programs, for instance, where they are totally outnumbered and nobody knows how to deal with what they really want to write about. The access to black actors, a black director or a black dramaturg—that's not there. And now, they are watering down their plays. They're not writing about what they really want to write about because they don't have the real support they need to pull it off. And I'm a product of that struggle. It's a fine line between embracing this afrocentric process, for instance, in that the playwright doesn't get consumed with teaching folks about his or her culture because in many ways we don't have time for that. We need to be able to move forward in our work without having to educate white people on what it means to be black. No, we need them to surrender to us even when they're not a part of the consensus.

Eugene: So, when a director brings afrocentric objectives to a rehearsal process; a lot of these things happen innately. Instinctively.

Clinnesha: That's right.

Eugene: We're not really re-inventing the wheel. Black theatre in America is an evolving phenomenon and we have to bring our own models to enhance and place a cultural stamp on the work.

Clinnesha: That's it. Exactly. And as a result of that there are some really good outcomes especially when it comes to young, emerging artists who don't have to alter anything they do instinctively. By instinct. What comes naturally and what is inherent, you don't feel like you have to modify that to matriculate in theatre.

Eugene: There tends to be a strong sense of judgment in "black writers-ville" that my work is going to be judged by standards that I am not aware of. I hope this approach that you're writing about gives freedom from that concern. The two objectives should be I want to be clear and I want to be understood. Not that I want you to like what I've done.

Clinnesha: Otherwise, why even make the effort?

Eugene: This chapter of yours seems to be about bridging cultural gaps. I embrace this idea. A lot. Having known August. Having known Douglas Turner Ward. Having done the lion's share of my career in black theatre. Working with new plays. The NEC, they don't do nothin' but new plays. We were taking new plays off of peoples' typewriters and standing them up. So this is really special to me, first of all. I've gotta say that to you and I wish you much luck. God speed with this.

Clinnesha: Thank you.

Eugene Lee has worked with theatre companies around the world including the renowned Negro Ensemble Company in New York, performing in the Pulitzer Prize winning "A Soldier's Play" and numerous other works. His journey includes work at stages such as True Colors in Atlanta, the Huntington Theater in Boston and the Pittsburgh Playwrights' Theatre, Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles and Crossroads Theatre in New Jersey. He is considered a "Wilsonian Warrior" for his work in the plays of August Wilson, including the Broadway production of "Gem of the Ocean." He has performed in eight of Wilson's 10 cycle plays and recently in August Wilson's final autobiographical one-man play, "How I Learned What I Learned." His work in television shows include "American Crime," "The Women of Brewster Place" with Oprah Winfrey, "Dallas," "Good Times," "The White Shadow," and "The District." He is the title character in "Wolf," an award winning independent film. His television writing credits include episodes of "Homicide: Life on the Streets," "Walker, Texas Ranger," "Michael Hayes," "The Journey of Allen Strange" and "The Turks." His own characters come to life through his plays: "East Texas Hot Links," "Fear Itself," "Stones in My Passway," "Somebody Called: A Tale of Two Preachers," "Killingsworth," the musical "Twist" and "Lyin' Ass." The feature film adaptation of "East Texas Hot Links" is scheduled for production in Spring 2016 with Lee directing and Samuel L. Jackson as Executive Producer. Lee is Artist in Residence and Artistic Director of the Black and Latino Playwright's Conference at Texas State University.

For **Clinnesha D. Sibley**, social activism and artistic practice must intersect in order to fully tell stories of the human condition viewed through the lens of black people. Her award-winning plays have been called feminist, protest, political, southern and circular. Her widely known works include "Tell Martha Not to Moan," "Bound by Blood," "Search Team," "Thorns," "Uprooted" and "Naked: What Women and Their Bodies Represent to America"-- all of which have received national recognition by reputable organizations including Penumbra Theatre, Eugene O'Neill Theatre Center, Kentucky Women Writers Conference, The Black Academy of Arts and Letters and NYCPlaywrights. She is also known for authoring numerous essays including "How to Survive Predominately White Academic Theatre: Cause a Disruptive Innovation," published by Howlround in 2016. Clinnesha is a 2017-2018 National Arts Strategies Creative Community Fellow and an Instructor of Literary Arts at the Mississippi School of the Arts.