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The American Voices New Play Institute at Arena Stage

Black Playwrights - The Stories We Tell

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A report on a convening of playwrights and institutional leaders on the current state of black playwriting in the American theater.

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I. Introduction

For its second convening, the American Voices New Play Institute at Arena Stage (the Institute) wanted to explore the current state of African-American playwriting. Sparked by conversations at the National Black Theater Festival – informal conversations that heralded the work of yore as the height of black theater and questioned the direction of current playwriting – the Institute wanted to explore the notion of “who makes the rules” about what is “acceptable” for Black playwrights to write.

On January 16-17, 2010, the Institute, in partnership with Georgetown University's Theater and Performance Studies Program, invited more than 30 playwrights and institutional leaders to Washington, D.C. in order to address the pressing issues facing Black playwrights in the new play development sector. With the death of revered playwright August Wilson, the 2008 presidential election of Barack Obama, and the recent field-wide conversations about the state of Black theater and new play development (including the Black Women Playwrights meeting in Chicago, the work of Farrell Foreman at the Bear Arts Foundation, and the ongoing inquiry into the state of Black theater from the August Wilson Center), the Institute wanted to advance the inquiry around these specific questions: What stories are Black playwrights allowed to tell? What impact do the mainstream institutions, culturally specific institutions, and theater patrons have on these stories? How are these playwrights being nurtured? What are the next steps to further developing the field for these individuals?

II. Standing on the Shoulders of Giants

"The shadow of August Wilson. August's aesthetic, his form of making work...He was unbelievably successful so that his shadow is on all of us." – Dominic Taylor

One of the readings given to participants in preparation for the convening was "The Ground on Which I Stand," August Wilson's 1996 address to the Theatre Communications Group National Conference. While for some it was an opportunity to refresh their memories of Wilson's speech, for others it was their first time reading the full address.

Overall, the group revealed that their collective memory of the speech was in some ways reduced to the "sound bite" revolving around Wilson's opposition to color-blind casting. Many were amazed by how many other issues Wilson addressed that have been forgotten or ignored. As Shay Wafer, Vice President of Programming for the August Wilson Center for African American Culture, said, " We were cheated in many ways by just that one little

paragraph being the sum—when it came out publicly of the entire speech—of his entire thinking.”

Many participants expressed a desire to use this speech as a springboard for action. As hip-hop playwright Psalmayene 24 expressed, “How can I throw a grappling hook onto that and use it and stabilize myself and climb up it? Because otherwise it's a great piece of writing, it's inspirational, it's poetry – how do we use that? He went to the mountaintop and I'm sure many of us here hopefully will surpass where he's gone. But that's just one question: how do we use something like that? Which, in my opinion, is like my version of the ‘I Have a Dream’ speech. That's how I look at that piece.” While Wilson's piece was the most referenced work during the convening, it was also argued that there are many important black writers before and after August Wilson who have been forgotten or unacknowledged. With the group's focus on finding ways to help the growth of black playwrights, both current and future, many stressed the importance of learning from all the great voices. As Dominic Taylor, playwright, director and Associate Artistic Director for Penumra Theatre, said, “Angelina Grimke writing Rachel, William Wells Brown writing *The Escape*; or, *A Leap for Freedom*.... Even Louis S. Peterson writing *Take a Giant Step*...Before Lorraine does *Raisin in the Sun*. My point is how we have been stepping on the shoulders of giants for so long, and we ignore them...And we stop, and we are looking at this thing right now... As my grandma used to say, ‘you ain't the first black man to read.’”

III. Mentorship: A Cake in One Hand, a Club in the Other

“Anybody who is having access to access has been beat up enough to tell you how not to get beat up.” – Lydia R. Diamond

In conjunction with learning from the published writings of the great black playwrights, the playwrights in the room underscored the importance of mentorship in their own careers. Providing everything from encouragement to information on how to navigate institutions to feedback on the work, mentorships were heralded as “the best way to make theater.” In addition to the wisdom bank on how to connect playwrights with theaters and audiences, many playwrights expressed gratitude for the mentors who were the saving grace in their careers. As playwright Marcus Gardley said, “I write very big epic plays. My smallest play is like eight characters and very big black tracks,... because that's the way I see the world. And it's been a pretty tumultuous journey up to now, and I remember on one occasion I really was going to just leave. It wasn't really a good match – the kind of work I did. I tried to write a two character play, which turned out to be twenty... And [Lynn Nottage] took me out and said: ‘You have to stay, you have to last, because it's a process... You teach audiences how to understand what you're doing.

You just have to state what you're doing is just really complicated.' She said, 'Just keep doing it and they will eventually listen to what you're doing.'"

Although the type and method of mentorship varied, the most important aspect of a good mentor was one "that teaches you." Playwrights advocated both for the informal, spontaneously created mentorships as well as a concentrated effort by seasoned playwrights to find a young playwright with whom they can establish a relationship. Playwright Lynn Nottage stated, "I think that community is extremely important, and I think that you don't have to reinvent the wheel, but there are people who have been in the trenches and know how to get there. The second thing is figuring out a way that we can work together as a community to advocate for each other and utilize our power to somehow effect change."

One strong example of effective mentorship highlighted was the Cave Canem Fellowship. Organized for black poets in 1966, the Cave Canem organization has an annual retreat where young writers apply to be mentored by established writers. These mentors help them to develop their craft and the Fellowships confer legitimacy upon the up-and-coming poets.

IV. Black Theater vs. American Theater

"I think that as a writer this is an interesting moment, because I never thought of myself as an American, was not raised to think of myself as an American. And I'm sure my father, may he rest in peace, is probably spinning in his grave for me to even say the words, thinking of myself as American." – Pearl Cleage

Participants continuously voiced frustration over the segregation between "black" theaters and "white" theaters.

Many of the older playwrights in the room came from the tradition where black theater institutions are considered the primary community that supports early career black playwrights. Usually small, these theaters are valued for giving playwrights both encouragement and production opportunity. ETA in Chicago was lauded over and over again. Seen as a "training institution, so they don't use Equity actors and you're not going to make any money," ETA exemplifies a company whose efforts to develop new work consistently provides solid opportunity for black playwrights. Not only does ETA provide space and trained dramaturgs to help the playwrights, they have also created a strong, supportive following in the community. As playwright Lydia R. Diamond detailed, "You'll never have an audience like that ever in your life because it's full. Every night...[and] 200 black people feels like 500." Participants noted that there are other small, effective companies like ETA who are not only "under the radar, they're OFF the radar."

Despite the promising work developed in institutions like ETA, and the reputation of small black theaters as a home for aspiring playwrights, many of the young playwrights in the room were open about the fact that they were not being invited into these "homes." Many said that they chose to first submit their work to these small culturally specific institutions having heard stories of support and the community they offered. It was when they were rejected (or ignored) that they began looking elsewhere. As playwright Katori Hall explained, "The idea of a culturally specific institution has not existed for me at the beginnings of my very career. I've knocked on the door of Penumbra, I've knocked on the door of Continuum, and I've wondered: was it the plays that I was writing that I wasn't given an opportunity to cultivate a relationship and establish a home in a place that is a culturally specific institution? It's been very saddening, very disheartening. Because I want to establish these connections with my giants, with the more established playwrights in the business. But that community, that tie, has not developed at all for me." Many of the young playwrights expressed that they often feel like the black institutions have a specific aesthetic that does not necessarily fit their voices and perspectives and believe, like playwright Keith Josef Adkins said, that they have to "fight against being ghettoized by the black theatre community that historically has sort of been uninterested in provocative works, more edgier works, works that do more than just sort of mirror or feed sugar to the community."

Many in the group raised concerns about the perceived legitimacy of black theaters. Although funders have created financial opportunities for playwrights of color through specific programs, many despair that this funding is not being funneled into culturally specific theaters. This lack of investment in culturally specific institutions creates unstable financial models that ultimately stunt opportunities available to playwrights. Financial realities limit the amount of work that can be done by these institutions. As Dominic Taylor said, "I am arguably in one of the largest African American theaters in the country. I am the new play department program. My staff is in my head, that's it. When we go to the Guthrie which is ten times our size... and their literary manager and their staff... I'm sitting there like, 'Wow, this is really interesting! You get to talk to people other than yourselves!'" What's more, the lack of resources can also serve to prohibit the theater from fully realizing the artistic vision of the playwright, thereby preventing potential growth for both the playwright and the work at hand. To make matters even more difficult, when playwrights are able to overcome (or work with) these obstacles, the common perception is that plays that premiere at black theaters, even to rave reviews, are often dismissed as "black work" and do not receive the clout that is inherent at other institutions and can lead to subsequent production opportunities. As Jennifer L. Nelson, Director of Special Projects at Ford's Theatre and former Artistic Director of the African Continuum Theater

Company, said, "There are some places that generate new work or that do new work that confer a kind of credibility on the play that then allows the playwright to move on – or helps the playwright in their process. But a small black theater? Not necessarily the case."

Consensus among the group was that large leading theaters – the ones with the greatest resources, the largest audiences and the most prestigious reputations – are seen as "white" theaters due to their homogeneous leadership, board, staff, programming and audiences. Black playwrights are frank about the fact that they feel like they are in competition with their fellow black colleagues for the one designated "diversity" slot per season, usually in February. However, while on the surface there is a unified call for change, the room continuously revealed a much more complicated relationship between "white" theaters and black playwrights.

There was a sense of uneasiness in admitting to solid, positive artistic collaborations with "white" theaters. While productions at leading theaters were deemed a goal by aspiring writers, some playwrights confessed to feeling judged (negatively) by their mentors and colleagues by where their plays are produced. Many feel that the plays picked by the white theaters are all "accessible" – theaters ignore the great diversity that exists in black work and choose the "safe" plays for their audiences. Playwrights who are then produced at these institutions fear that they are perceived as "sell-outs" by the black theater communities – that their plays are seen as lacking true "soul" or "blackness." Although playwrights acknowledged that they have all heard stories of people who make the choice to write a play that the "white people will produce," they also argued that the plays they write are ones that come from their hearts. It just so happens that the plays deemed "accessible" are the plays that are more frequently produced.

Although the group acknowledged the field's traditional separation between black and white theaters, some wondered why the field allows this distinction to perpetuate, especially when, as Jennifer L. Nelson pointed out, "the global irony and the injustice in this is that our culture, African American culture, has become one of the predominant forces in global culture now. What happens in the Black community becomes the hippest thing. Now you go into a department store and they're like 'what's up.' It's our dress, it's our language, it's our music – every new thing that comes through, even though it may be initially condemned by the main stream, two years later it's in the main stream. But we're not – we're still assumed to be on the sidelines. And I just find that incredibly, kind of appalling, but also shocking to me. How long? How long does this have to go on?" Knowing the potential power of the community, many questioned what kinds of "come to Jesus" conversations were actually currently happening with the "ivory towers" in order to effect change.

However, although there was plenty of blame laid on the mindsets and traditional practices of the “white” theaters, there are some who argue that the change must first occur in the way the black theater community talks about and views the field – and itself. Part of this argument revolved around the division and labeling of both the theaters and the work: black, white, or “culturally specific.” As Pearl Cleage said, “I refuse to call them ‘white’ institutions anymore. I’m calling them ‘American’ institutions now.” Many expressed the opinion that the overall mindset of the field would not change until the African- American community stopped, as Paul Carter Harrison said, “letting people marginalize you and make money off of this ‘black thing.’ when it’s actually American work. Be part of the American canon.”

V. Black Stories? American Stories?

“I’m fascinated by the fact that where we are now in the 21st century... we cannot tell American stories as just American stories.” – Jennifer L. Nelson

The group discussed the way in which plays written by Black playwrights are categorized both by the playwrights themselves and the field as a whole and how this categorizing influences their success. While acknowledging that there are certain writers who are writing from a specific African aesthetic, many playwrights are tired of having their stories marginalized as “black” plays. Writing from their own experience, many are puzzled as to why their stories are not seen simply as American. The opening statement of long time dramaturg, director and playwright Paul Carter Harrison summed up the prevailing feeling of the convening: We are “trying to create some kind of space that would be welcoming to American writers – period. Black or white, or whatever. But unfortunately, most black writers who are writing today do not think of their work as being American, but they are actually American works. And they ought to stop calling it ‘black.’ Now, I think that’s the first step. If you’re not writing in a particular aesthetic that belongs to African aesthetic sensibilities, you need to step up and defend it as American writing. And make sure that people respond to it that way. Instead of saying ‘I’m doing a Black work.’ That puts you in a kind of marginalized space. If that’s what you’re doing – American work – call it American work. That’s my response....Now I don’t do American work.”

The group also reflected the existing tension within the black theater community about codifying and defining “black” voice and “black” theater. Although many of the participants advocated that playwrights should be true to their art and to the stories that they feel compelled to tell, many playwrights feel their work is at odds with what has traditionally been

accepted as "black theater." The following story is one of many examples shared:

I had an experience maybe six months ago with a director... I had a play that was written out of my particular experience as a black person in Ohio. And my family had been Catholic and gone to white Catholic churches for a couple of decades. I wasn't exposed to what people call the "traditional black church experience"...and the director came in and he was telling me that my language wasn't going to be received by the black audience. He said it sounds too much like whites, or there's a lack of a certain syntax or rhythm. So he started going through my play. He was going through the text and asking me to cut off the end of words and switch around the sentences so this thing sounded more like a black person would speak. He was asking for these things and I'm like, "Couldn't we just work on the actor's approach to what he's not getting in that scene", and he's like, "No, I think this is much more important. We have to sort of find you the right language that will then create a call and response from the audience."... And the director was black... And I remember feeling kind of caught in between: "Well, I certainly want to appeal to the black people, because I'm telling a black story." But this is also the way I know how to speak to black people. But then it was like: "This man is sort of imposing his idea of what a black play should be and how it should sound."...It was an interesting dynamic because I certainly wanted to listen to a person who I thought was a professional and certainly had lots of experience in theater and certainly has had many successes in productions...But I really wanted to sort of – I thought maybe there something I was missing. And then I was like: "but, no, I have to be able to sort of stand up to my own work and my own blackness."

As playwright Lydia R. Diamond said, the whole group seemed to agree that "we have different notions of what is black enough. And we can agree that we are even taught to have these disagreements about what is black enough in order to divide us." The idea of staying true to your own blackness resonated strongly with the younger participants who rebelled against the idea that all black playwrights hear a specific voice or channel a specific history. However, despite their wish to avoid being pigeonholed into a certain aesthetic or to feel like they need to champion a certain cause, many wondered about the possibility of getting produced (at both black and white theaters) when they wrote characters who didn't do "black" things or fit the prevailing notions of "blackness."

Playwrights bemoaned the lack of acceptance of comedies by both black and white theaters. Playwrights feel that black humor is considered threatening to both white and black institutions. While recognizing the complications in the genre due to the legacy of minstrel shows, playwrights believe that comedies – especially those that find humor through juxtaposition – are a strong medium in which to explore the complexity that, as Dominic Taylor said, “is black life.”¹

Many feel that the source of this tension lies in the ability of a white audience to laugh at racial issues. In describing the premiere of one of her own comedies, playwright Tracey Scott Wilson recounted the following: “It was a large black audience that gave the white audiences permission to laugh. But if black people were not there, they would just look at each other like, ‘Are we supposed to laugh at that?’ It’s like the white audiences are afraid that we don’t have the same kind of humor. Somehow the audience being a little uncomfortable for thirty seconds – they don’t want that thirty seconds of uncomfortableness. They’re like, ‘Wait... she said the “N word,” but she’s not Chris Rock – and this is a play.’”

Playwrights also felt that for their work to be “permissible,” their characters must live in stereotype². One example was the portrayal of African-American women. Jennifer L. Nelson asked, “Where are our women’s stories? The people-that-I-know’s stories. Who didn’t grow up in abusive households, who didn’t have parents who were alcoholics or drug addicts, who had rich and interesting stories? For some reason I feel like our women’s stories are not considered stage-worthy. That kind of women’s story. And that’s something I’m struggling with right now – because I find that I’m writing stories – the more I write out of my own experience, the less violent the stories are, the

¹ The discussion on comedies occurred during the second day of the convening, the night after the majority of the group had seen a production of Lydia R. Diamond’s *Stick Fly*, a comedy about an affluent African-American family whose secrets come crawling out during a weekend vacation at Martha’s Vineyard. This production was not mentioned during the conversation.

² During the discussion of black characters and the stereotypes that are often portrayed on stage, the sense of the group was that black characters should be written by a black voice. This view, centered on the belief that a black playwright has the necessary insight into the complexities of community and culture necessary to write a fully fleshed out character, challenges plays about black people written outside their community.

This argument was complicated by the public portion of the convening during which six playwrights were asked to share selections from plays they were currently working on. Of the six presented works, four had characters from other races (including White, Asian, Native American, Latino, Haitian and “Unintelligible”). Obviously black playwrights realize that the ability to tell their stories necessitates them writing about the communities with which they intersect. However, it raised the question of what it means for writers outside of these communities whose stories intersect with the black community.

more they're about some internal kind of dialogue and a character who's dealing with just trying to know who she is and try to keep who she is consistent, and she lives her life in the face of challenges and the challenges are not somebody hitting her, or things like that. Like, a challenge of conscience for example. Those are the stories I would like to see more of. Because that's what resonates with me. We're not always a people in conflict from external sources. And neither are we all women who 'talk like this.' There's a character who would be considered stage-worthy. But an African-American woman with a Ph.D., struggling with whether or not she can go on a camping trip with her husband – it's like 'whoa, a Ph.D.... a camping trip??'"

And through it all, playwrights wondered about their ability to tell their community's most challenging stories. As playwright Daniel Beaty said, "The American Theater needs a civil rights movement – and it really is about a movement – it's about us really realizing that the greatest way you control the psyche of the people is to control the way they see themselves. That is not just about us telling stories, it's about the fact that no matter...that we have a black president or biracial president in the White House, there is still a huge segment of our society that is disenfranchised and without hope and needs to have stories told that provide some window of possibility to their lives." Stories about AIDS, homosexuality and even general dysfunction are often deemed taboo and off-limits by the black community. As Tracey Scott Wilson said, "August: Osage County – If Lynn or Katori or Marcus or any of us had written a play with a black family that had the level of dysfunction that family had, it would not get a reading. And Phylicia Rashad – are you kidding me? Do you think she would be in that play? No way."

Playwrights pointed to Chekhov as an example of a playwright who succeeded at telling hard stories while writing from a place of love for his community. They do not see why they should not also be free to explore challenging stories from their own communities.

Many participants recognized the current political climate – specifically the election of President Obama – as a changing force in the potential future of black theater: a force whose impact is still rippling out. As playwright Pearl Cleage shared her own thoughts and insights, many added their support and agreement:

At this moment, with a black man in the White House, having been voted into the White House by my fellow Americans and sister Americans who thought he was the best. 'Cause they didn't vote for him 'cause he was a black man. A lot of us did, but a lot of other Americans thought he was the best one. So I'm saying: "Wow, he won the primary in North Dakota? Black folks are in North Dakota?" My brain was still saying he couldn't

possibly have won any place where there aren't a majority of black people. So all of that means that my brain has to think differently about what it means to be an American, because for the first time I feel like, "Okay, if that's my president and he's the president of the United States of America, I gotta be an American." What does that mean? Not to the LORT theatres, not to the black theatres, but to ME as a writer. How does that alter what I think about what I'm writing?...Sometimes it's just so hard to get in a group where we're all together and we all talk about our artwork because we're taught to be worried about the big white theatre. So the first thing is: I'm not calling them the big white theatres anymore. I'm calling them American theatrical institutions. And I'm calling myself an American playwright. And I'm going to write plays that, since I was born here I can't claim any place else, though we used to say we're not Americans, we're from Detroit. So what does that mean? What does that mean for me in terms of how much I have to structure race into the plays I write? At a certain point every play that I wrote had to end up with a revolution in it, cause I was raised as my father's child and I was gonna do that. But then I was like "Okay, what does that mean? If I don't have to do that, if I don't have to write as an angry black nationalist, or an angry radical feminist – if I can write as just a writer, a woman who writes, what's that going to do for my love stories? What's that going to do for my stories about family? What's that going to do for the other work that I'm doing?" ...

We don't have to waste our time worrying about what they want or whether or not [other people] value our stories. We know we're human. We never doubted it. So we don't have to worry about it anymore. When people want to know about: "Well, how can you do this? How can you do this?," all we gotta do is point to the White House and say: "The country has changed. It's not perfect, but it's definitely different."

VI. Power Dynamics

"Do what you do. And if they run you out of town, lead the parade." – Robert O'Hara

The group spoke of the "few white men" in the field who have control over who is produced and who is not. Some postulate that this unhealthy power dynamic – whether real or perceived – exists because the black theater community continues to allow it.

The group sees the fractures within the black theater community as the biggest obstacle to overcoming the imbalance of power. These differences – what is a “black” play, where should “black” plays be produced, what are the “responsibilities” of black playwrights, and what is the future of black playwriting – have led to division and stalled progress in the field.

Group consensus was that the community needs to come together in order to effect change. However, the only way that the community can effectively work together is by accepting the notion that they will not all agree, and that these differences of opinions are not only acceptable, but have the potential of positively affecting the strength and possibilities of the future of black theater. As Marcus Gardley said:

I think long term vision is a discussion that needs to be had. I come from the church, so theater wasn't in my growing up until it was one and the same. I find that the real goal is community, but it's also about getting people to talk about long-term vision. Don't sleep on your brother's dream. I don't have to have the same dream, but I need to work to help it happen. But we need to have the same vision. Some people want the Pulitzer, some people want the money. That's fine. We need to have the same vision, and our goals can be different. We have all these visions, and then we split by divide and conquer, and this has always kept our community down. And it's boring. Theaters need to take a playwright that they know will work with their community, and they need to connect. They need to take a risk for long term vision.

Although the group as a whole was not willing to give up on demanding change within the “white” institutions, many playwrights championed the idea that the black playwriting community would benefit from a more entrepreneurial spirit. As Daniel Beaty said, “There was a statement made towards the beginning of this conversation that if we come, they will build it. And I would like to submit instead we must come together and we must build it. Because I feel so many things about it but I personally am of the frame of mind of ‘what’s next’ and ‘what’s the next step.’ What we’re dealing with has been going on for such a long time...but what do we have today that we might not have had before.” Many participants gave strong positive examples of the opportunities they found when taking a more pro-active approach to getting their work produced instead of waiting to be deemed “legitimate” and “relevant” by specific institutions. As playwright Keith Josef Atkins said, “Tracking [their] career, tracking [their] work, to sort of feed that mark of approval.”

Rha Goddess provided a strong example of the power of self-producing. Rha spoke about her unique history, coming from a non-theater background, creating her own work and producing it, which ultimately, she feels, served her career best. She believes that a writer must first identify the aim or purpose of his or her work (both individually and in the community) and then make it happen: "There is something about us becoming much more entrepreneurial in what it is that we want to do. Art has always been...in my experience... a place to stretch boundaries creatively. But our business. I really hope we will find space to go deep about business. What is it going to take for us to handle our business in a way that opens up tremendous possibility for us and everything that comes after us?"

One of the biggest advantages inherent to this "make it happen" attitude is the ability of the artist to build individual relationships with other artists as well as institutions. These relationships create opportunities for partnerships that strengthen the black theater ecology as a whole. As Neil Barclay, Chief Executive Officer, National Black Arts Festival and founding CEO of the August Wilson Center, said, "We need to be more aware of the ecology that develops anything. There are all these different kinds of institutions and models that if we become intelligent about it, can be intentionally utilized to further a certain goal. It's some things I'm learning from the environmental movement. That there's a concerted effort to put together the dots, that everybody doesn't know how to do "x" but they're really good with water, and they're really good with plants, and they're really good with farms. And what we need to do is all kinda work together on that. So I think that maybe that is the conversation we need to have: what does our ecology look like? And where are the institutions and/or individuals that we can put together in some kinda intelligent way to further the work that we care about."

Strengthening the black theater ecology itself is seen as an avenue toward promoting less dependence on the current power balance, which some feel boxes out opportunities for black playwrights. Jennifer L. Nelson offered a baseball history analogy. "We couldn't get in the major leagues, so we started our own league. The players were so good that they were eventually incorporated in the national leagues – but it was another 30, 40 years before there was a manager, an owner, a coach, a pitcher, a quarterback of color. Is that what we're going through in theater as well? That before we have any muscular impact on this field, as insiders, that we have to go through yet another wave of ... what?"

However, even with all the possibilities that arise from a playwright's entrepreneurship, there is one major drawback. With all that is required in order to be successful in these ventures, playwrights lose significant opportunity to do their actual job: write. Some questioned why it fell on the playwrights, and not their agents or the institutions, to create these

opportunities. Playwright and actor Nikkole Salter, whose *In the Continuum* with Danai Gurira was held up as a positive example of this entrepreneurial spirit, said, "I can align the stars, but then I don't write... But I got relationships! And they're like, 'What's on the table? What you got going on?' And I'm like, 'Oh!... Well, uh...'" But I met you! I got it all hooked up, it's all lined up, and I have no material to give you."

VII. The Audience

"I really feel like in theatre, the beat of theatre is truth. We're in the art of truth. This is what we do. And when we have that moment of truth THAT is the moment when the audience...if they're a black audience, somebody'll say 'Mmmhmm.' That's truth! Or somebody'll say 'Well...!' That's truth!" – Daniel Beaty

Part of the discussion about what stories black playwrights are "allowed" to write centered on the audience. Black audiences, which have a reputation for not wanting to see "edgy" or "provocative" plays, were often seen as the largest obstacle for playwrights attempting to expand the possibilities of their stories. Many playwrights feel that a large portion of the black audience is conditioned to believe that they only want to see August Wilson or Tyler Perry. This perception of the black audiences is challenged by some of the institutional leaders. Neil Barclay commented:

It's so funny as a presenter because what black audiences say a lot to me is that they want more complex, more expansive views of what black people are. That they're really kind of tired of seeing the same old stories. It's generational in some cases, but it's very interesting that there's this whole group of people who would tell you that what we think of as the traditional black canon is not what they're interested in at all. Because they see their lives as more international perhaps, or operating in a lot of different kinds of complex spheres. And they also see the sort of complexity of their lives and they don't want to go to something that reduces that in very simplistic ways. And so, I find that part of the challenge on the presenting side is looking for the work and bringing it to those audiences who really do feel that they want to see and hear and feel something that has a certain kind of complexity to it. I think that is very real and very much there within the black community at this point.

The other thing is, I think our work has to be more intentional. That it's very good to be able to write what you want and be reflective, but I think we need to understand the power that we

have to articulate a certain view of ourselves and of our world, and that that power is probably more respected, understood, and gotten than we perhaps give our own selves credit for sometimes. That sometimes we're the ones saying this is the limited view of what we can say and what we can do and who we can say it to, etc. I think we can afford to be more expansive and that there is an audience for that actually. We haven't perhaps catered to them as much. We haven't done our work to bring that audience to these works.

The degree to which a theater is able to lend context to its work, to make it accessible to an audience, was seen as a major influence in achieving audience acceptance. As Neil Barclay continued, "[Audiences] can take experience, understand a broad range of complexity, if given the tools to do that." Playwrights argue that theaters in general have not developed the vocabulary necessary to adequately describe – and market – black work.

Many believe that working with the playwright is the key to institutions bringing in audience – that through building stronger relationships between the artist and the audience, theaters will better engage their stakeholders in the work that they will be seeing. As Sandra Gibson, President and CEO of the Association of Performing Arts Presenters, explained, "What we've found is that the artist, the playwright, is the most important ingredient in unlocking whatever it is... introducing yourself and all your complexity in a variety of ways. And if you work with that richness that is not just a post-performance talk or program notes or pre-performance lecture... it's you in the community, it's your blogging. You're introduced in a lot of different ways and all your layers come out. Because at the end of the day, what we want to do is foster curiosity. That's really what we want: an audience to be curious and to come and to find out more without having it all put together for them."

Hand in hand with this personal interaction, many participants advocated exploration of connection and engagement through available technology – such as web pages, video snippets of the work and social networking. Many believe this work is crucial to creating an audience that will return again and again, and be willing to experiment with the work instead of being limited to whether or not they "liked" it.

Along with this lack of vocabulary adequate to capturing the theatergoing experience, many playwrights feel that theaters do not know how to market their shows in a way that attracts the large potential audience that exists within the black community. Many cite the success of Tyler Perry as proof that there is a large, paying black audience that is not being successfully tapped into – and many blame it on the simple fact that the black audience is

simply not made aware that these productions are happening. One observer made this particularly apt point with his personal story:

My introduction to theater was Tyler Perry, Michael Matthews, David Talbert – people like that. I grew up in Los Angeles and actually another gang member was the one who turned me on to August Wilson for the first time. And just being a gang member, going back to school then, I read through it and (being from where I came from) thought: 'This is hot! Why do not more people know about it? Because if people knew about it, they would dig it.' And I used to wonder why just like when Tyler Perry comes to town, for example, those fliers are in all the barber shops, it's all over the net, they got commercials, they bought the billboard in the most busy part of town – everybody knows about it! And I think it's going to always, at this point, I think it's going to have to be reevaluated. It's going to have to come back to marketing, at some point. We talk about coming together – I think that's what it's going to come back to, because the African-American community at large – they aren't aware. They don't know. And they would come, I think.

Playwrights are also concerned that theaters who do successfully draw a black audience for a certain show do not then actually respect that audience by giving them the experience that makes them want to return. As one playwright put it, "If I'm gonna bring my people in, I want them treated well. I still go to the theater and somebody looks at me like: 'Are you gonna eat Cheetos, are you gonna turn off your cell phone?' Or I'm gonna call the babysitter before the show's starting and somebody will say: 'It's going to be very important that you turn off your cell phone.' At my own play! It feels like there's great work to do around [audience treatment] if those partnerships are going to happen. I don't want to feel like I'm pimping the community to put money in the pockets of an institution that doesn't actually [want them]. Or only wants our people there in February. For my play."

However, playwrights want more than the simple assurance that the black audience who come and see their shows will be treated with the same accord and decency that the white audience members receive. Playwrights are troubled by the fact that institutions seem to have no scruples in segregating their audiences based on their programming. They have "white" shows for the "white audience" and "black" shows for the "black audience," allowing them to fulfill the diversity quotient of their mission statements without succeeding in mixing their audiences. Like many other playwrights, Tracey Scott Wilson wanted to know, "How do we get theaters to say: here's a black play, let's market it to all of our audiences. Let's have the black and white audience come in there together. How do we get that conversation going?"

‘Cause I think that is the key. So we can show people, Look. Guess what. White people can see this too and not feel like it's an obligation or this has to do with Black History month, but actually seeing us just as human beings like everybody else.”

Many recognize that this fault does not lie solely with the theaters. Arena Stage Artistic Director Molly Smith stated, “It hasn't been easy. It has not been easy. And there's some audiences who come and say ‘I don't want to see the African American work’ and there's some audiences who come in and say ‘I don't want to see the white work.’ I mean, it has happened in both areas. And from MY perspective – because as you've said, it's all American work – let's find some of the most difficult conversations that happen in our country and put it on the stage. So I say it's an ongoing evolution in being able to make that happen.” However, even knowing the difficulties and complexities that exist, playwrights were emphatic that it is possible to make progress on this front. While they may write out of their unique perspective, many agreed that if black playwrights write truthfully from their experience, the stories have the ability to transcend cultural divides. As Paul Carter Harrison said, “Mr. O'Neill never thought he was writing an Irish play. He never said: ‘That's an Irish play.’ He wrote about something he thought was his particular experience and had resonance for a lot of people beyond Irish people.”

VIII. Next Steps

At the end of the convening, the group was given time to reflect on everything that had been said. Then, each participant was asked to write down – and report – the top 2-3 priorities they felt needed to happen in order to promote action. The reported list is, unedited, as follows:

Paul Anthony Notice II –

- encourage emerging works
- writer solidarity (support each other and say “that's not allowed”)
- improve public relations (getting the word out)

Lynn Nottage –

- ask the established playwrights to mentor a young playwright this year, ask the younger playwrights to look around and see who they can have a conversation and partnership with
- come together as a community, stick together and effect change
- write an editorial to the New York Times, as a group, outlining issues and concerns. We are a community and we are a community with power

Robert O'Hara –

- a call to action, a call to arms, and to sign your sign. Don't be afraid to put your name on that piece of paper. Address it to the AD's of the American theater. We see the brochures, we see the people. And what we see is unacceptable.

Keith Josef Adkins –

- create self-generated opportunity for ourselves and the community.
- create a festival that is designed to prepare audiences for the new black writers. Keep ourselves satisfied and feed and legitimize our own work.

Danai Gurira –

- keep the connection with the Diaspora

Daniel Beaty –

- partner with outside organizations (political, human sociology, etc)
- address the fact that writers of color are still seen as the "other" instead of a shared human experience.
- get black wealth to support black theater

Neil Barclay –

- the importance of mentoring the places that produce, not just the artists themselves.
- a major technology initiative – find a way to help us communicate more as a community.
- there are a number of things going around black philanthropy – how do we become more aware of it.
- social economic situation – have to deal with the fact that there are people who we want to see that work who can't afford the price of a ticket.

Paul Carter Harrison –

- it's much more empowering if we are more connected to a larger, global community. In this call to action, it's not just a bunch of fragmented issues – gender, sexual. There are a lot of bodies of black interest. We can't be fragmented by the different agendas.
- I'd like to see playwrights take into the room a black dramaturg as well as a black director.

Christina Anderson–

- creating an online listserv that allows us to know the community

Talvin Wilks–

- committing to the multiple ways of documenting our work.
- go forward with a fuller understanding of the work, its history, etc.
- counterattack the reviews.

Sandra Gibson–

- more critical writing, ways to prepare the ground. A type of translation that is needed to create context for what is going on.

Jennifer L. Nelson –

- create a festival of short plays tied to the Haiti earthquake – the potent cause of the moment
- publicize that the series will travel, can be locally cast, making the plays available. Market it nationally: “See the Haiti plays in your town.”
- in the vein of the James Hatch anthology, encourage someone like TCG to do 2 new volumes: 2nd half of 20th century, one that’s moving into the 21st century
- tap the African-American museums (like the Smithsonian) to realize that theater is art as well: create partnerships, have them do readings, suggest work that they can do
- create local initiatives: have Arena Stage do a month long festival of readings of local playwrights.

Kia Corthron –

- I love the Haiti thing. Use the 10 minute play form for political/social justice. Short plays, local casts.
- build bridges between black theaters
- the new guard – how that can change?
- Civil Rights Movement in the theater – like the proactive movement of white women in NY at the moment.

Tracey Scott Wilson –

- is there a way to look at what works in black theater (Tyler Perry, Vagina Monologue) and try to create a new model? This is how it works, this is why it works, and how can we take advantage of that. Conferences like this, but with people who are actually running the black theaters.

Shay Wafer –

- challenge the old guard to collaborate with each other
- create partnerships with the producers, museums, institutes of higher education – bring all the entities together to support a play.

Lydia R. Diamond –

- what we can do as individual artists who are fighting to be involved in black theaters?
- we need the American cultural institutions to realize that we are a part of their sector – and we need to demand our fair share of the resources.

Katori Hall –

- we all have to commit to doing small tangible things that will have huge ripple effects. Like supporting Keith's festival. Or the series of salons that I'm doing "Black Mondays." We need to start a conversation about black directors.

Rha Goddess–

- conversations with other institutions, other potential collaborations – need to be behind closed doors, come-to-Jesus conversations.

Psalmayene 24 –

- develop some sort of mechanism to involve the audience in more than the performance. It might involve technology, blog and the twitter thing, but there has to be another way to get them involved. Get them in this room, in this conversation.

Farrell Foreman –

- planning a festival in June 2010 with a Native American organization in San Diego.

Dominic Taylor –

- prepare folks for the new
- keep on keeping on – the fact that you are here, you've done stuff means you're going in the right direction
- find a way to articulate my aesthetic and my craft
- find a way to mentor positively
- keep working for justice – we use beauty to set the world right.
- we have to keep pushing our resources and our creativity.
- we have to keep reconnecting. Robert O'Hara told me: "do what you do – and if they run you out of town, lead the parade"

IX. The Return of the Third Circle

As with the first convening on Defining Diversity, the Institute had a "third circle" watching and talking about the discussion. Two professional bloggers were commissioned to post authorized summaries of what was being said on

the Institute's New Play blog (npdp.arenastage.org) as well as more personal observations on their individual blogs. There was also an additional blogger who served as the "Tweet Master," who, on the Institute Twitter account (@New_Play_Blog) used the hashtag #newplay to immediately disseminate thoughts and quotes from the room in order to generate conversation among the artists, institutions, funders and general public who were following along. A few examples of the types of discussions that were happening are as follows:

ezmac99: As a black theatre professional, it is rare to have access to those who ultimately will dictate the type of roles available to me. #newplay

New_Play_Blog: Referencing "Dilemma of the Negro Artist": "African American author has different obligation than `plain author'" #newplay

NYTW79: enjoying the #newplay discussion at @NEW_PLAY_BLOG. Long overdue convening of Black Playwrights

parabasis: @AlliHouseworth I hope we get rid of the feb slot within 1-3 years. #newplay

bryanjee: Wishing I was at the #newplay Black Playwrights Convening!!! Had a great time at Day One, and Day Two sounds even better!

mariahmaccarthy: Tweetpeeps, do u agree? RT @New_Play_Blog "If 1 of us wrote August: Osage County about black ppl, it'd never get out of a reading" #newplay

parabasis: Is this season of Broadway *really* dealing with race? #newplay Are "Ragtime" and "Finian" really a racialized discourse?

flagundino: Great weekend for exposing inequality in theater. It affects many "others" as well - Asians, Latinos, Native Americans... #newplay

AlliHouseworth: The Black Voices event at @arenastage was so amazing. Inspiring. Upsetting. Overwhelming. Make noise. Change the world. #newplay

Along with continued conversation on Twitter after the convening and additional bloggers picking up the thread of conversation, the use of social media to open up the conversation outside of the room was also recognized by Time Out New York which, over a three week installment, interviewed the three bloggers about their experiences with and observations about the convening. All three interviews can be found at:

<http://www3.timeoutny.com/newyork/upstaged/tag/black-playwrights-convening/>

X. And Onward...

The Institute, with its mission as a center that was specifically created to be a place where the actual infrastructure of new play development could be examined and tested with the purpose of disseminating the findings to the field, plans on continuing the discussion started at the convening with a focus on the steps that need to happen in order to move the field forward. The steps for further action are as follows:

- After this paper has been disseminated, the Institute will invite all participants to regroup electronically (via conference call or controlled chat room) to focus on what has happened post-convening and review the action steps.
- The Institute will then invite a group of willing participants to form a task force which will be responsible for determining which action steps will be left up to individuals and which ones will require further work.
- The task force will regularly convene with the focus to do this work, breaking down the steps and figuring out the best ways to accomplish them.

Since the time of the convening, the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation has given the Institute a grant as part of their National Sectors Program that will allow the Institute to re-gather the task force from this (and other) convenings. This large gathering will, in part, focus on a discussion of the convenings' final reports, updates from the individual task forces on steps made since the convening, and evaluations of the current state of the field. It will also hold a session devoted to identifying and advancing the opportunities embedded in this sea-change at hand for the sector.

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The American Voices New Play Institute is a center for research and development of effective practices, programs, and processes for new play development in the American theater. The Institute's programs are designed to test and develop promising advances in new play development around the country, with the intention of developing the infrastructure for new plays and new voices nationwide.

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