



## NOTES OF a COLOURED GIRL: 32 SHORT REASONS WHY I WRITE for the theatre

1 Carved from that same tree  
in another age  
counsel/warriors who  
in the mother tongue  
made drums talk  
now in another tongue  
make words to walk in rhythm  
'cross the printed page  
carved from that same tree  
in another age  
—Khephra<sup>1</sup>

2 Nearly a decade ago I found myself speaking with esteemed writer and Nobel laureate Derek Walcott about an upcoming staged reading I was directing of his play *A Branch of the Blue Nile*. Toward the end of our conversation I politely requested an opportunity to ask him what I termed a stupid question. His eyebrows seemed to crawl up to his hairline, but he didn't say no. Not that I gave him a chance. Swiftly managing to kick all second thoughts out of my mind, I boldly asked him to tell me

Sears's adaptation of *Othello, Harlem Duet*, is notable for many reasons, not the least of which is that it is the first play by a Black Canadian playwright to have won a Governor General's Literary Award and the first all-Black play to be staged at the Stratford Festival. Sears's play is prefaced by *NOTES OF a COLOURED GIRL: 32 SHORT REASONS WHY I WRITE FOR THE THEATRE*, which eloquently addresses issues of diversity in Canadian theatre and the motivations that prompted her to write this adaptation. Sears's words speak to the challenges of pluralism and cultural diversity that find expression in contemporary Canadian adaptations of Shakespeare. *32 SHORT REASONS* provides compelling insight into the sources, cultural, artistic, and otherwise, from which the power of adaptation flows, as well as into the power of theatre as a form of community expression.

LEFT Astrid Janson, costume design for Othello in *Harlem Duet* (2006)

why he wrote. He retreated to the back of his seat, and after several long moments of pondering, he replied, “I don’t know.” He said that writing wasn’t really a choice for him. From as far back as he could recall, he had written. He described it as a type of organic urge. He didn’t know why he wrote, but when he experienced this urge, he felt compelled to act on it. Be it on a plane, first thing in the morning, or last thing at night.

**3** From as far back as I can recall, I never believed in miracles. My life had taught me not to. Then I witnessed the birth of my sister’s first baby. I’d seen birth films. I’d even studied human reproduction at the undergraduate level. But this child came out of my sister—already alive. I mean, not yet fully born, her head alone protruding from between her mother’s thighs, she wailed. Full of voice, she slipped out of the velvety darkness that was her mother’s womb, into the light. I was overcome. I watched as Qwyn, this tiny, golden-umber-coloured soul, caught by an opaque-rubber-gloved doctor in a white coat, was separated from the placenta and bundled into blanched cloth. I stood there for a moment and wondered how she would come to know of herself, blinded by the glare of snow? What would this fair world tell her? I experienced such a sadness for her—or maybe it was for myself.

**4** I wanted there to be no question of her right to take up space on the planet.

**5** I was already eighteen when I saw Ntozake Shange’s *For Coloured Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow is Enuf* in New York City. This was the first live stage production by a writer of African descent I had ever seen. **6** This will not be Qwyn’s fate (nor the fate of her younger sister Kyla, her cousins VaNessah, Djustice, Ariane, Justin, Donny, Sherie, or Danielle). **7** They must have access to a choir of African voices, chanting a multiplicity of African experiences. One voice does not a chorus make. And I will not wait. **8** I harbour deep within me tales that I’ve never told. **9** I too must become an organ and add my perspective, my lens, my stories, to the ever-growing body of work by and about people of African descent.

**10** Forty-seven years ago, and nine months before I was born, in a country over three thousand miles away, Lorraine Hansberry began rehearsals for her first play. In the season of my birth, *A Raisin in the Sun* opened to extraordinary critical and popular acclaim.

**11** *A Raisin in the Sun* marked a turning point, for until this time no Black writer, Black actor, Black director, or technician had benefited financially from any of the plays about Black people that had been presented [in the commercial theatre].<sup>2</sup>

**12** An old West African proverb states that, as a people, we stand on the shoulders of our ancestors. **13** Lorraine Hansberry is my mother—in the theatre—and she accompanies me wherever I go. **14** I have been known to drop her a few lines, now and then. **15** Yes, she responds. **16** As a woman of African descent and a writer for the stage, I stand on her shoulders. They are a firm and formidable foundation on which to rest my large and awkward feet.

**17** Acting is a craft that I have been called to by my nature. Writing is a craft that I have chosen to nurture. **18** As a young actor, I soon realized that a majority of the roles that I would be offered did not portray me in the way I saw myself, my family, or my friends, in life. I became consumed by my own complaining. **19** Complaining, imploring, and protesting, only served to disperse my energy.

**20** Protest takes an enormous toll. We can and should make noise. However, in most cases our screams fall upon deaf ears.

**21** Don't get me wrong here, without protest we'd never have had the likes of Martin, Malcolm, or Angela. Activism is a craft in and of itself. My skills are as a theatre practitioner, and this is the medium I must use.

That's why I am so impressed by artists like Baraka, Sanchez, Bullins, Caldwell, Hansberry, Baldwin, Giovanni, Milner, and Ahmed, many of whom were involved in the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s. The fact

is they used their work as a vehicle with which to express personal and political passions.

**22** In early 1993, Christine Moynihan approached me, on behalf of the Toronto Theatre Alliance and Equity Showcase Productions, about coordinating the spring “Loon Café”—a one-off evening of presentations involving a host of performers, directors, writers, production workers, designers, and supporters. I agreed, on the condition that I could do anything. In the ensuing weeks, I developed the blueprint for the evening, which I titled: *Negrophilia: An African American Retrospective: 1959–1971*. The three studio spaces of Equity Showcase were renamed: Obsidian, Onyx, and Jet. And the events taking place, three in each room over the course of the evening, involved readings, performances, and discussions around Black theatre in America. There were plays that I had loved and only read. One new piece, *Jimmy and Lolo*, was a collaboration based on an idea that had been brewing inside of me for ages. Performed on the rooftop of an adjacent building, the play tells the story of the relationship between James Baldwin and Lorraine Hansberry. The entire event was inspirational; a rousing celebration of Blackness.

**23** I have a dream. A dream that one day in the city where I live, at any given time of the year, I will be able to find at least one play that is filled with people that look like me, telling stories about me, my family, my friends, my community. For most people of European descent, this is a privilege taken for granted.

**24** Like Derek Walcott, I too have no choice. I must write my own work for the theatre. I must produce my own work and the work of other writers of African descent. Then Qwyn’s, her sister’s, and their cousins’ experiences of this world will almost certainly be different from my own.

**25** But where do I start? How do I find the words?

**26** My good friend Clarissa Chandler, a business consultant, educator, and motivational speaker, shared with me a process for using my nagging mind and my raging heart as a way to get back in touch with my

innermost knowing and creative desires. She identified three steps of transformation that I could use like footprints leading me back home.

**27** First: identify the place of complaint. (This can sometimes be evident in the complaining we do in hiding, in conversation with friends, and/or in the privacy of our own minds.) Second: Say it out loud. Create a mantra out of it. (Give it room in the world). Third: locate a creative point of expression for this mantra. **28** Paint it, dance it, sculpt it, or write about it. Why limit yourself?

**29** As a veteran theatre practitioner of African descent, Shakespeare's Othello had haunted me since I first was introduced to him. Sir Laurence Olivier in blackface. Othello is the first African portrayed in the annals of western dramatic literature. In an effort to exorcise this ghost, I have written *Harlem Duet*. *Harlem Duet*, a rhapsodic blues tragedy, explores the effects of race and sex on the lives of people of African descent. It is a tale of love. The tale of Othello and his first wife Billie. Set in 1860, 1928, and contemporary Harlem at the corner of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Boulevards (125th Street and Lennox Avenue), this is Billie's story. The exorcism begins.

**30** For the many like me, Black and female, it is imperative that our writing begin to recreate our histories and our myths, as well as to integrate the most painful of experiences.<sup>3</sup> Writing for me is a labour of love, probably not unlike the experience of giving birth. In a very deep way, I feel that I am in the process of giving birth to myself. Writing for the stage allows me a process to dream myself into existence.

**31** In a recent clinical study at Duke University, researchers found that racist comments can not only lead directly to an overworked heart, but the internal stress caused by racism was found to tear the lining of blood vessels.<sup>4</sup> I must write to save my own life.

**32** There are a great many times when I forget. I forget why I'm doing this. Days when the blues move from a deep cerulean to icy cold pale. So I have the following words by Langston Hughes on my wall, just above my desk, for those times when I most need reminding.

SOMEDAY SOMEBODY'LL  
STAND UP AND TALK ABOUT ME  
AND WRITE ABOUT ME—  
BLACK AND BEAUTIFUL  
AND SING ABOUT ME,  
AND PUT ON PLAYS ABOUT ME!  
I RECKON IT'LL BE  
ME MYSELF!  
YES, IT'LL BE ME.  
—Langston Hughes<sup>5</sup>

ENDNOTES

- 1 Khephra, "Talking Drums #1," *Essence Magazine*, March, 1990, 125.
- 2 Woodie King and Ron Milner, eds., "Evolution of a People's Theatre," *Black Drama Anthology* (New York: Signet, 1971), vii.
- 3 Marlene Philip, *She Tries Her Tongue* (Charlottetown, PEI: Ragweed Press, 1989), 25.
- 4 Deborah Franklin, Sally Lehrman, and Michael Mason, "Vital Signs: Racism Hurts the Heart Twice," *Health* (October, 1996), 24.
- 5 Langston Hughes, "Note on Commercial Theatre," *Selected Poems Langston Hughes* (New York: Random House, Inc., 1974), 190.

**Djanet Sears is a playwright, actor, and director. Born to a Guyanese father and a Jamaican mother, Sears was raised in England and in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. Her birth name was Janet—she added the "D" when she came across a town called Djanet on a trip to Africa. She has won many awards for her play *Harlem Duet*, including four Dora Mavor Moore Awards and a Governor General's Award for drama. Sears is a founding member of Obsidian Theatre, a Toronto theatre company that specializes in African and Caribbean Canadian drama. She is also a professor at the University of Toronto.**