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The Role of the Page in Jazz: *Dyke/Warrior-Prayers'* Theatrical Jazz Aesthetic; an Interview with Sharon Bridgforth

Eric Gottlieb & Sharon Bridgforth

EG: The first thing I wanted to talk about is the production history of *dyke/warrior-prayers*: what it was like to create it, and then how you implemented the jazz aesthetic in the play's first performances.

SB: It's interesting. At the time, when I first wrote in the 90s I had a theater company called the root wy'mn theater company, and, by the time we presented *dyke/warrior-prayers,* I was working with one performer. I had found that trying to be artistic director, writer, director, all these things with shows with multiple performers—I didn't have any infrastructure. The one performer—it's like we are each other's soul, like our souls understand each other in terms of collaboration and creativity. There was a way I didn't need any other performers. Although, all my work can go anywhere from one person to twenty.

Anyway, that performer's name is Sonja Parks, and Sonja can make anything great. I was blown away with her embodiment of the text. With the text, when I wrote *dyke/warrior-prayers* there were two primary curiosities I had. One, in deep engagement with artists younger than me that identified as hip-hop artists, or part of the hip hop culture (and I am older than that age group); I was

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just enamored by what I saw in that culture, but I didn't know about it. I am talking about the original, not the thing that became commodified and kind of bastardized later. Just what they did with language blew my mind—how they could create and enter these ciphers and make magic with language, and then the integration of movement, and visual art, and audience, and commentary on timely matters. It really moved me. I think I was inspired by being close to people, I was facilitating workshops with these younger artists, so I got to hear about their process and their thoughts and was inspired by that.

Secondly, this was the time that, in addition to having the theater company and facilitating workshops, my day jobs were in social services. I had managed syphilis cases for the health department in Austin. I later became part of the first wave of HIV outreach workers, early-intervention specialists, folks who did street outreach and testing—stuff like that. I was coming towards the end of my time during that work, and the reason I was coming to the end of my time was I couldn't continue to grow as an artist and have a day job—and I had five jobs (because that was how I paid for things with the theater company). I loved the work, but ultimately I felt like my calling was to be an artist; I hadn't made that leap yet. But I was really walking with a sense of despair from seeing how systems didn't serve our communities. I was also walking with a sense of admiration for how resilient and generous our communities are and how we just take care of each other, we figure things out, and we thrive anyways.

There were all these feelings that were moving inside my spirit and I was in the midst of a shift that hadn't yet happened. I think *dyke/warrior-prayers* is a result of all of that. Ideally, most of it would have been sung. Sonja doesn't sing. So one, I feel like the piece was a little ahead of its time in terms of its structure and what I really wanted; it was ahead of me, I didn't know quite how to make it live in the way that I was fully feeling it. Two, I didn't have the infrastructure to build it out in the way, in my spirit, I imagined and wanted it to be. I was totally pleased because Sonja is amazing, so it was all of that and this.

EG: That's amazing! What do you think that means for the play to be "ahead of yourself," not just ahead of its time?

SB: I think it means that I grew through writing the piece, but I hadn't yet grown into who I was becoming. I didn't have the skillset, I didn't have the community, the infrastructure or collaborators; at the time, I hadn't even worked with people that would later become my mentors (like who I've come from artistically). I was doing things by any means necessary. I was growing, and I was becoming fully myself, but I hadn't quite landed yet—I didn't have everything that I needed because some of the other things, like mentors, would've pushed me and then I would've seen it quicker.

EG: That thought reminds me a lot of what I was feeling when I read *dyke/warrior-prayers* for the first time, which was about understanding yourself, self-healing, and ritual. Reflecting on those ideas, what do you feel the central theme of *dyke/warrior-prayers* is? What do you think the role of ritual is in *dyke/warrior-prayers'* presentation?

SB: In this piece, and this is true for all of my work but it's really true for this one, the play functions solely, primarily and urgently for the purpose of healing: looking back, looking around, so we can move forward. There is a kind of anger, a kind of rage, a kind of outrage of not being able to understand, not being able to hold everything. All of that, I feel like, is and was important to surface and swirl in this world so that healing can then happen.

EG: What do you think it means for us to "swirl in this world?" Is that why you experiment so much with language and grammar throughout the play?

SB: For me, I caught up with this later so I don't think I really understood this then, but what I can now say is: I am really just trying to tell stories as good as my family. My family is full of great storytellers, Black southerners who were part of the Great Migration who live their traditions and values and cultures in every way and offered those to me as life. They are things that I treasure dearly. For instance, gathering (which I think is sacred, I think it's part of how we survive). I think it was an act of self-determination and transgression in some ways—that there was so much gathering that happened and in the gathering we feed each other, there's celebration, there's dancing, there are stories being told, there is hope and promise, there's prayer. Everything happened in the gathering, and because of the gathering we could survive the week. I grew into how I really, in my heart, hope to honor and be inside of that later. But with *dyke/warrior-prayers* I was beginning to understand and play with that on the page. Shifts in rhythms, shifts in sensibilities, shifts in timing, and at the center of it all: ritual.

EG: I think that idea of visual rhythm is what fascinated me the most when I read this play, and I was wondering what role you think language has in translating those intonations, that rage, that incredible gathering feeling that you are talking about—then putting that onto the page.

SB: First of all, Dr. Omi Osun Joni L. Jones has written the book on the theatrical jazz aesthetic, and the book is *Theatrical Jazz: Performance, Àṣẹ, and the Power of the Present Moment*. In it, one of the many many important things she does is she talks about the lineage. I come from an artistic lineage. Just like jazz musicians—once you call it something, they're like, "jazz, what?" But what we can all agree on is that there are certain things that we work with, there is a history of training, there are certain things. For me, and again I witnessed this growing up as a child in LA raised by Southerners, language is music. Black language to me is music. So, how do I use the page to hold that music?

Within Black music—and one of the things that is so powerful about how Black people talk—is that a pause contains information. That silence in a pause can carry more information than two paragraphs. When I think about, okay, how do I do this, how do I have the page hold the music as language? How did my family do that? What was so effective? It's the pauses, the shift in rhythm, the intention of what was being said, sometimes more than what they said. It is simultaneity, lots of things happening at the same time. It is a whole lot of people talking at the same time. Nine times out of ten, you'll pick up on one who I'll call the lead speaker. But there are lots of other people talking and there's singing and there's a lot of things going on while the lead speaker is telling that story. How do you use the page to hold all of that? Well, I didn't discover Ntozake Shange until the late seventies. The first piece of theater I went to (I was twenty), it was the touring version of *for colored girls*, the original touring version in San Francisco. When I saw that, I understood everything. I leaned into what Ntozake Shange gave us, not only with the piece and performance, but also on the page. Langston Hughes was always a huge influence for me. What he did with Black language, particularly blues style language, what he did was honor the brilliance of Black people: our resilience, our self-determination, all this stuff, with his way of using the blues on the page.

There are all these roadmaps, things people have already done, things that had great impact, things that I maybe were impacted by but didn't actually find until later—holding pain while staying in a space of dreaming, really staying focused on honoring what wants to come through as opposed to how I thought it was supposed to (we are even sometimes taught, and how we think it is supposed to look and be)—dreaming, and honoring, and staying curious, and then leaning into what's already there, leaning into the legacies that are already there. That's been the way for me.

EG: How would you describe "blues talk"—what Hughes inspired you with. What makes something blues talk compared to something not being "blues talk?"

SB: For me, in my own work and experience with it, as someone who has lived with blues people, shaped by the blues, I feel like it is sacred. The blues holds history, it holds defiance, it holds possibility, it is masterfully humorous. It uses humor almost like a dagger. It uses small words, and words that are created—words that are self-defined, including spelling. Sentences tend to be shorter rather than longer. With the pauses and with the silence, and what's under what's being said, there's so much information. Jazz comes from blues. Underneath the blues is spirituals, field hollers, work songs, and ritual. Branching out from the blues is jazz, and, I would also say hip-hop.

EG: Back to the play more specifically, I was wondering who you think the narrator is? Is it multiple people, is it multiple voices from the same person? How do you envision the narration of *dyke/warrior-prayers*?

SB: That's a good question—I feel like it could be a lot of different things. I think it depends on who's embodying it, both as a reader and in performance, who the collaborators are, how the direction is being shaped. So, I think it could be a lot of different things, and I don't think I knew this then, but I think that because I'm within a cosmology where the past, the present, the future, the living, the dead, the unborn coexist, the same soul could be multiple people in different times. Also, Toni Morrison has this essay called "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation," and again, I didn't know this then but in retrospect it really is part of how I work, think, and believe: the "I" is "we." I believe this because this is how I was raised. "I" could be ten people. I think the point is that we grow, we learn, we take care, we heal.

EG: That idea of collectivity, I thought, was really inspiring when I read the play, how you would play with different pronouns being thrown around throughout it, and I felt the language was almost like a journey. And that reminded me of something that I remember was mentioned in *Theatrical Jazz*, which was Moten's idea of "the break." I was wondering how typography (the way you visually layout the page) can impact "the break." Or at least, let the reader come into themselves like Omi described.

SB: It is an invitation to collaboration, for the reader, for the performers, for collaborators, as opposed to me putting a bunch of directions and a bunch of "so and so is speaking" and "this one is speaking." My intention is that it invites the reader or the collaborator to bring what they know and what they hear and how they move with these shifts in sensibilities/rhythms and stories/experiences. Hopefully, it becomes the way that people are able to place themselves in this world with full agency.

EG: In *Theatrical* Jazz, Omi mixed images of Yoruba culture with her text while also mixing different types of text (i.e. italics and different colors). How do you think authors can then mix images and words to create that jazz and create "the break?"

SB: I think everybody is different. I think what's most important is that people are leaning into their own dreams, heart's desires, and knowings, and that we all each individually, as creatives, tend to what wants to happen. What wants to happen may not be what I've been told needs to happen. What wants to happen may not be what I have dictated to myself as the thing that I'm doing. I think in order to really tend to what wants to happen, in order to tend to the dreaming and the excavation of the work, a lot of research (whatever research means) is required. You can't let what wants to happen happen if you haven't tended to what scares you. You can be scared and still move forward, but also, hopefully, you're tending the things that might hold you back. It's like the story Omi shared—it's almost like the garment gets stuck on something and the person doesn't move forward because they're stuck. There is a kind of release when we do the inner work, the more and more we do it the more we get released, so we can tend, allow, grow, shift, heal, change, offer.

EG: I was also wondering about how then, typography factors into the queerness of the jazz aesthetic. What makes your use of slashes or hyphens or empty space especially queer throughout the play?

SB: Well, I guess my first reaction is what do you think?

EG: I think it definitely does. That's what I hope to uncover throughout my research.

SB: Got it, yeah. There's a fluidity. Because of the times and places we live, a danger; there is a power and an inner resource which queerness demands. If we're going to be queer and we're going to be as vibrant as we're able and we're striving for healthy whole lives, a lot is required of us, so our ability to expand and to open and to hold and to face hard things and to say hard things and have courage is always, I think that's part of our daily lives. Language that "breaks the rules" quote unquote—I don't think it's breaking the rules for me it's very traditional—it's very much my lineage, both blood lineage and artistic lineage, but the rules that have been forced on us. To break those rules is very queer.

EG: That's why I assume you did so many interesting things in the title of the play, with the slash between "dyke" and "warrior" and the hyphen between "warrior" and "prayers." What do you think, specific punctuation like slashes and hyphens do? I thought they connected words, but do you see any other ways those punctuation marks work?

SB: I think they hold information, so I think there is a kind of coding. They connect words, they connect ideas, they connect rhythms or they break them. They sometimes, in a way they are shaped, can cause dissonance which is important in jazz. Therefore, they make room for the unseen to surface.

EG: Is that what you mean when you talk about how a silence in a Black person's speech can mean much more than the words they say? Is punctuation one of the ways you create those extra layers of meaning?

SB: Absolutely. And again, coming from being inspired and influenced by Ntozake Shange and Langston Hughes and Zora Neal Hurston (I would also say that was an early influence), I had things to look at that were beginning places for me to play from. Then, I created my own set of rules, but they were inspired by these other artists' works.

EG: And that brings me to how I thought alignment also functioned within the play. I felt like there was a pattern between them—left-right-center-right-left-middle—continuing almost like a jazz song. I was wondering what you thought about how this almost created the resonant frequencies of the jazz aesthetic. How does that contribute to the overall feeling of ritual in the play?

SB: See, I want you to direct the piece—that's what I mean, it's so exciting to be in conversation with people. Because the work is an invitation for people to bring what they know, I'm always amazed and surprised and get to continue to grow and think in conversation with people who are really engaged with the work, like you are. When I hear you say those things, I'm like "wow, I bet he'd be a great director for the piece!" So, yes, my answer is yes.

EG: Fantastic! Why choose the specific typefaces that you did throughout the play: the skinnier one for the center narrator, bold for the left, italics for the right?

SB: In my own heart's desire and in my own plane of language as music, it's a notation of sensibility, rhythm, maybe even place sometimes (physical place). It was a way to shift, to have the language shift us. In my own head, it's almost like dancing, like I'm hearing and I'm feeling these changes and these shifts. Also, a way to have some continuity too, so when it's over here it's this, when it's here it's this, when it's there it's that.

EG: It's like call and response.

SB: Yeah, it kind of is.

EG: One person on the left side of the page is almost speaking to someone on the right side of the page and you're having a dialogue between different characters. All this grammatical creativity that I find so interesting throughout the play is used almost to reclaim American English, I found. What do you think grammatical creativity can do to change the norms of how we speak and write as playwrights?

SB: I think everybody has their own individual sourcing and intentions and ways that work for them. For me, more than anything, it's an honoring of who I am and who I'm from and privileging them and their wisdom (both bloodline and artistic lineage and learnings) as valuable and as important. It's just the normalization of what is when all the hate, the racism, all the phobias, all that stuff is stripped away, and just what is—it's hopefully beautiful, valued, prayerful, healing, and that that ritual serves whoever receives it.

EG: On that topic of bloodlines, how do you think someone, who is ambiguous about their bloodlines (for example, doesn't know where they came from, who their family is), how can a person like that use the spiritual power of jazz?

SB: I look to jazz musicians and singers to learn how to articulate what it is that I'm trying to do, want to do, and believe in this regard. It's like they're listening for the thing that hasn't been said or heard yet. They're listening with all of their essence so that they can be open to right now and the next, and that holds the past too. Basically, I believe in blood memories, the things that we know that we know and we don't know why we know them. I believe that as individuals, we are deep wells of possibility and power and light. Anyone that is willing to do the work of being present can tap into the well that is inside of them and find a way to be a part of the collective, to find a way to be the lead when it's their turn, to find a way to express the rhythm that's new.

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