

2019

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Recommended Citation

Richards, Paulette, "An Email Interview with Alva Rogers" (2019). *Living Objects: African American Puppetry Essays*. 16.

https://opencommons.uconn.edu/ballinst_catalogues/16

An Email Interview with Alva Rogers

by Paulette Richards

Paulette Richards: You attended the High School of Music and Art and went on to earn an MFA in Musical Theater Writing from the Tisch School of the Arts at NYU. What got you interested in theater at such an early age and what prompted you to pursue a career as a playwright in addition to your work as a performing artist?

Alva Rogers: I was fifteen the first time I set foot on a Broadway stage. It was during a miserable call-back audition at the Majestic Theater for Stephanie Mills's understudy in *The Wiz*. My initial audition was good enough to get me a call-back for the producer Ken Harper and the gifted composer-lyricist Charlie Smalls. However, my performance anxiety was overwhelming, but I was smitten. Nothing prepared me for seeing *The Wiz* on Broadway. Nothing prepared me for seeing a "black Dorothy" on the archetypal heroine's journey in New York City (not even *Raisin in the Sun* or its musical adaptation). But long before then, my father took my brother and me to the theater when we were quite young—we saw adaptations of fairy tales at small theaters in Greenwich Village. Reading Lorraine Hansberry's *To Be Young, Gifted, and Black* when I was seventeen made me think I could actually dream about one day writing a play. Lorraine Hansberry's playwriting was a direct offshoot of her social activism. She did not major in theater. In fact, I think she was studying visual art at the University of Wisconsin at the time her father was the plaintiff in a housing discrimination lawsuit. Although the seed was planted, the dream was out of reach. Not only that, I had no idea how I would synthesize everything and take actions that would lead me to become a playwright. I wanted to become a journalist or a historic preservationist, and I studied history and politics as an undergraduate. I did not aspire to become a professional performer, although I was preparing for such a career as an adolescent. But life was in front of me to be lived, and I believe in seizing opportunities as they arise. I was an intern reporter at *Newsday* one summer and I thought my career would lead me in that direction.

Music and art and history and politics and a BA launched me into the adult world with a renewed interest in fairy tales and my new discoveries: Magic Realism, Lorca, Adrienne Kennedy, and August Strindberg. I also became passionate about preserving and honoring New York City's seemingly small cultural and historical treasures. How would this translate into writing for the theater?

After college, I traveled in Europe, where I spent some time hitchhiking and I eventually ran out of money, and so when musicians discovered I studied bel canto I was asked to sing in various ensembles. When I returned to New York, my work as a musician continued and I began songwriting. My songs were like little stories, and eventually those songs became more theatrical and performative. I began performing with dolls and adding vocalizations to excerpts from *Mules and Men* by Zora Neale Hurston, and created a vocal coda from copy of an advertisement I found in a copy of *Negro World* promoting the sale of dolls from Marcus Garvey's Black Doll Factory. I founded a music publishing company and I named it Negro Doll Factory Songs. The ad copy went like this:

Negro dolls with brown skin

Give your child one of these

Negro children should play with Negro dolls

(then I added the following: *Send your orders now in time for Christmas*)

Then my career as a performance artist began. Julie Dash saw my photo in *High Performance*, a performance art journal, and decided she would pursue casting me as Eula in *Daughters of the Dust*.

I wanted access to larger more conventional theater spaces. As I watched other colleagues create and produce pieces for larger spaces, the doors did not open for me. Consequently, I decided to get formal training/instruction on writing/constructing opera, musicals, and plays, and obtained an MFA in playwriting from Brown University in 1998, and an MFA in musical theater writing from NYU's Tisch School of the Arts in 1995. While working on my MAT in history at Bard College (2012), I completed a research paper (thesis), *The Negro, The Cold War, The Silver Screen: The Historiography of Black Cinematic Representation from 1900 to the Civil Rights Era*.

I met Cheryl Henson through her Yale classmate, Scott Richards, who was in my NYU Tisch School of the Arts, graduate musical theater writing cohort as a composer, and I met Heather Henson while I was a student at Brown and she was a recent graduate of RISD working in Providence, and we (along with her roommate, sculptor Holly Laws) began collaborating on my thesis, *The Doll Plays* in 1997.

PR: One of your most memorable roles was Eula Peazant in Julie Dash's groundbreaking film, *Daughters of the Dust*. The film is notable for the way the lyrical beauty of the cinematography functions as a kind of visual poetry. Your scripts also present successions of poetic tableaux. Did you imbibe this style from working on the film or does it come from other influences or experiences in your life?

AR: Oh no, I did not imbibe that poetic style from working on the film at all. Maybe it is because Julie and I share the same birthday. That is true, but I think that our similar styles are coincidental or synchronicity was present. You decide.

I think of my work as having a connection to, or having been influenced by, the surrealist painters, as well as a line of African-American writers including Adrienne Kennedy and Ralph Ellison, who I consider to be embodied surrealists. Magic realism exists seamlessly within musical theater/opera forms and I place my work within those contexts as well. I am also influenced by the plays of Federico [García] Lorca, whose work, like my own, always has a feminine sensuality inherent in it; Robert Wilson's imagery/silences; magic realism and Indonesian shadow puppetry's way of revealing the inner lives of characters.

I always begin with a central image and I listen to and for meter in the dialogue.

PR: Similarly, your plays often have a cyclical, non-linear narrative structure, just as *Daughters of the Dust* unfolds as a cyclic, non-linear narrative. Given that audiences can find this approach confusing, what does this form allow you to express that a more traditional plot structure would not?

AR: The form allows me to create absurdist and surrealistic play worlds that include moments when fantastic elements collide with a realistic narrative that at times unfolds outside of realistic time. I went to live in Southeast Asia for one year, where I became immersed in Indonesian shadow and rod puppetry. Being away from western constructs of theater-making allowed me to think about what was possible for me, as a writer interested in creating worlds with puppets.

PR: In one scene from *Daughters of the Dust*, Eula recounts the story of the Africans who turned away from slavery at Ibo Landing and walked back across the water. This folktale resonates powerfully in African American culture. For example, Toni Morrison based her novel *Song of Solomon* on a version in which the Africans flew home. Yet later in the film, Bilal, an old man who had been a child on the same slave ship, says that all of the Africans sank to the bottom of the water and didn't rise up again. In your own work you draw on folktales that similarly ask the audience to accept alternative ways of representing and interpreting reality. What purpose does this "magic realism" serve for you?

AR: Magic realism, along with my discovery of the inherent mysticism/spirituality/belief in the unseen world of Gullah/Geechee culture of the Sea Islands of South Carolina and Georgia, inspired my adaptation of the Japanese folktale *The Crane Wife* and the Gullah adaptation of Cinderella called *The Mermaid*.

PR: During our preliminary planning for the *Living Objects: African American Puppetry* exhibit, the advisory board had a lively debate about the distinction between dolls and puppets, yet you use both dolls and puppets as performing objects in your plays. Indeed *The Doll Plays* transforms some of the actors into dolls and also animates dolls by manipulating them like puppets. How would you describe the similarities or differences between dolls and puppets as performing objects? Why do you so often engage audiences' "willing suspension of disbelief" by animating such figures on stage?

AR: One modern-day difference between dolls and puppets is their reason for being, or *raison d'être*: Dolls are generally figures representing humans from infancy through adulthood created specifically for play (however, Greek and Egyptian jointed dolls are ancestors to puppets—some had strings and rods). Girls play with dolls and learn how to care for babies through their doll play, and so on. The book *William's Doll* by Charlotte Zolotow is about a boy who wants a doll, even though dolls are considered toys only for girls. In the story, his grandmother thinks it is important for him to have one because he may grow up to be a father one day.

So, in my opinion, dolls, even when transformed from play objects of girls to performing objects via stop-motion animation, animation through the manipulation of a doll's jointed legs, arms, hands, and feet, or the swivel of their head are not always revered in the way puppets are as performing objects. A side note: Dolls were used subversively during and after the antebellum period—the Topsy Turvy Doll is one example of this. In her scholarly work *Racial Innocence: Performing American Childhood from Slavery to Civil Rights*, Harvard professor Robin Bernstein argues that “childhood innocence” was essential to the formation of racial stereotypes and roles. White girls were given stereotypical black dolls to “practice” or “play” or learn how to treat their African-American counterparts (the children of their slaves) in a sub-standard ill-humane way, among other subversive acts that led to the further construction of stereotypes and the racial divide.

Puppets are figures that are moved by rods, strings and gloves/hands and light and silhouette (shadow puppets). Puppets use illusion and are inherently magical as they can be imbued with any spirit or personality.

PR: Why do you so often engage audiences' “willing suspension of disbelief” by animating such figures on stage?

AR: Puppets/dolls open a window on understanding the “uses for enchantment” in our lives. Bruno Bettelheim in his book [*The Uses of Enchantment*] gave me permission to find a way to put this in my work as a writer. Using puppets in my plays has allowed me to heighten the theatricality of the work. Puppets insist that the viewer/audience become

engaged with their imaginations, and it eases them into the realm of enchantment. This is especially true for adults. Children have the inherent ease to trust the world of the imagination. It is as though they know somehow that imagination is what connects us to the truth and to happiness. My plays follow a non-linear approach to storytelling and puppets enhance and illuminate that structure.

PUPPETS/DOLLS make surreal stories magical and real in ways the human form cannot. PUPPETS/DOLLS reveal character heart and soul in ways the human form cannot. DOLLS/puppets are enchanting and enchanted.

Sometimes animating such figures on stage is an absurdist gesture meant to let the audience in and to introduce the audience to the journey they are embarking on. Other times, the doll is performing the gesture or the message in lieu of me, the human performer, and the collective eyes of the audience lock onto the doll. I found that fascinating and liberating (liberating, as it aided in the alleviation of my performance anxiety).

Animating black and brown dolls on stage is at times a gesture of mourning, of reverence, of love and of defiance. The image alone can speak volumes without dialogue or song.

PR: When Actor's Express Theater in Atlanta mounted a production of *The Doll Plays* in 2002, audiences left dolls in the lobby as offerings in a pile that grew to tremendous height by the end of the run, standing as a testament to the powerful connection some communities felt with the story. Cultivating connections with communities that support avant-garde theater can be a significant part of the artist's work. You undertook this work very early in your career by co-founding Rodeo Caldonia Hi Fidelity Performance Theater, a black feminist artists' collective with Lisa Jones in your native Brooklyn. Please comment on the work of community and audience-building as part of your artistic practice.

AR: Because my artistic practice included my work as a vocalist, songwriter, performer, and composer, who at times created some conceptual works through sound and doll installations, I built community across those disciplines by performing and becoming a

regular at the following performance spaces: The Knitting Factory, The Kitchen, P. S. 122, Dixon Place, Just Above Midtown/Downtown Gallery (JAM), The Pyramid Club, and the Brooklyn neighborhood Fort Greene, where many of us lived. Rodeo wouldn't have been able to mount our first piece without the generosity of talent, time, resources and spirit of all the women in our collective. No one was offering us grants or spaces to produce and mount our productions. Lisa's sister Kellie Jones (a recent MacArthur Award recipient) offered us our first opportunity to mount a show in a Bronx gallery in 1985. Then it just snowballed and our community and audience increased with each performance.

PR: Mother/daughter relationships are a frequent theme in your work. What does your script for the puppet film *Egg Whites* allow you to explore and communicate that you hadn't addressed before?

AR: Yes, that is true. Mother-loss has been a recurring theme in my plays. In *Egg Whites* I sought to explore the fear that a child experiences when the lights have to go out at night and she is told to go to sleep without the aid of her mother or father in the room. The protagonist in *Egg Whites* suffered the loss of her elder sister, which precipitates her inability to sleep and exacerbates her need to always know the whereabouts of her mother at night. At bedtime, my daughter would insist on knowing "the night schedule" before she would allow me to leave her bedroom. It usually involved baking breakfast muffins or lunch treats for her lunchbox the next morning. I've often wondered if the sounds and sweet aromas from the kitchen affected her dreamscape. *Egg Whites* is the result of those musings.