

2019

Five-Star Review and Other Responses

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Tau Bennett

Nate Puppets

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Five-Star Review and Other Responses

by Sheila Gaskins, Tau Bennett, Nate Puppets, and Akbar Imhotep

My name is Sheila Gaskins and I am a Baltimore Educator, Artist and Puppeteer. I am writing about the wonderful, amazing, awesome and timely effect the *Living Objects/African American Puppetry Festival and Symposium* had on me.



Photos by Sheila Gaskins.

First, it was an excellent opportunity to see so many Black/Brown talented Artists, Puppeteers, Panelist and Art makers in one space at one time; that reality was very

overwhelming! I have not ever been invited to a puppet festival and I am over fifty years old. I was not exposed to the level of talent that exists in Puppetry that just shows the need for more African American-themed Festivals and Symposiums. This event needs to tour various cities and abroad.

The content was relevant and timely. I learned so much: the various types of Puppets, the history of Puppetry in other countries, the use of Puppets as ritual and healing tools, and how to build props, sets and Puppets.



Photos by Sheila Gaskins.

At the beginning of the festival it was noted how Slave Masters in America forbade any living objects, trinkets, dolls, play or culture from the enslaved to journey

over with them from America. They thought they might contain bad omens or energy, so it was frowned upon.



Photos by Sheila Gaskins.

Minstrel Puppetry or Blackface Puppets: It was stated that Mr. Rice, an Irish Puppeteer, made \$6,000.00 a month performing blackface puppetry in 1870. That was a lot of money then; it is a lot of money now. The history of Puppetry is built on Minstrel Puppetry. The question is if you teach puppetry, do you talk about Blackface Puppetry/

Minstrel Puppetry. And how that impacts the systemic violence against Black men. The Minstrel Puppetry = unrealistic images of Black bodies = Potential lynchings = living objects. A series of historic negative images made me associate the image of Emmett Till's face to that of a puppet that was a part of the Harlem Puppet Show. I kept thinking, "That teen puppet looks like a talking Emmett Till's face." It was haunting. *Living Objects/African-American Puppetry* was deep and profound; it touched on several topics that we as a society should talk about more often.

In conclusion, with the creative process of this Puppetry Festival by the use of Research, Puppetry History, Theatre, Performance, Community workshops, and Expert Panelists, The Ballard Institute made a great experience that will be remembered for a lifetime. A memorable experience that You didn't know You needed!

Respectfully submitted,

Sheila Gaskins
April 26, 2019

Blurbs

by Symposium Participants, to Paulette Richards

Tau Bennett

What the exhibit has done for me is it's given people an understanding of the kind of work I do. Playing one of my videos in front of an audience and getting to talk about it and take questions was a great experience and I hope to one day do that sort of thing again. Hearing laughter from an audience was really encouraging to me and the people I've been collaborating with.

Nate Puppets

I feel like the festival was very validating, I see more and more Black puppeteers every day and I just want the number to keep growing and would love to see more festivals.

The festival gave me an important purpose in some of my art and an awareness to blackface's role in America. It made me realize and remember just how much and how many puppets have this subtext. A true awakening to race culture in this country that I've used to educate people.

Akbar Imhotep

The Living Objects exhibit was "almost" like a dream to me. When I received the participation inquiry from Nancy Staub, it was unbelievable. Then to meet you and have our introductory conversation lead to a wonderful magazine article was truly amazing. On top of all of that, I had an opportunity to connect you with Malika and she having an opportunity to make a presentation at the Living Objects Symposium was more than I ever imagined.