

Dramaturge's Note:

In the Blood by Suzan-Lori Parks

Playwright Suzan-Lori Parks stands as one of the most prolific and dynamic theatre practitioners of the late 20th and early 21st centuries. With 19 plays under her belt, Parks has won a Pulitzer Prize (nominated three times, including one for *In The Blood*), two Obies, and a MacArthur Foundation “Genius” Grant, to name a few of her accolades as a playwright. Part of what makes Parks’ body of work unique is her ability to work so poignantly across several different theatrical genres, such as musicals, absurdism, and realism. Another factor that sets Parks apart from her contemporaries is her brazen willingness to experiment with form, language, and style; often mixing and matching aspects of Brecht, Buchner, and Ancient Greek drama in order to focus on people and problems that often lie at society’s margins. In fact, *In the Blood* takes its inspiration from Nathaniel Hawthorne’s most famous work *The Scarlet Letter*. Hawthorne brought forward the literary figure of Hester Prynne in order to prick 19th century America’s consciousness around its own hypocrisy—speaking directly to issues of gender, sexuality, over-zealous religiosity, and patriarchy. In response, Parks offers us the character of Hester La Negrita, a black and homeless, unwed mother of five. As a meditation on class, race, gender and sexuality, *In the Blood* asks us reflect upon our own tethers and ties to the women we craft into the Hesters of the 20th and 21st centuries.

In the Blood pulls us in through an experience of intense moments of attraction and repulsion towards the body and behaviors of Hester La Negrita. Parks writes, “creating someone I don’t know and her made-up world shows us more about who we are—is actually a *better mirror*—than if I were to parade in front of you an instantly recognizable person in an instantly recognizable situation” (Sova 33). In the character of Hester La Negrita, Parks crafts a figure who is not *instantly recognizable* to most American theatre going audiences; though we may have passed by several Hesters on the way to the theatre tonight. As The Doctor in the play confesses, “There’s such a gulf between us...At first, I wouldn’t touch her without gloves” (Parks 40). Hester is homeless, literally and figuratively, a woman without place or space in a society predicated on her remaining impoverished. As the character The Welfare Lady explains, “the balance of the system depends on a well drawn boundary line” (Parks 43). Nevertheless, the beauty of a master craftswoman like Parks is that Hester is not simply a one-dimensional *victim* of the various systems that she interacts with. Parks does not allow the term *victim* to define who Hester is, as a full human being.

Once a character becomes a subject upon the stage, we are forced to deal with a real flesh and blood individual who is multidimensional and flawed. Hester La Negrita is a complex dramatic figure because she is both a victim of the social systems and simultaneously complicit in her situation. As Hester says to The Welfare Lady, “My life is my own fault. I know that” (Parks 42). The complexity and richness of Hester underlines her humanity. Hester’s mistakes make her human, they allow her to live, to some degree, as a subject versus merely an object of society. In a *New York Times* interview Parks, talking about *Venus*, another of her plays that deals with black womanhood, explains,

I could have written a two hour saga...[about] being the victim. But she’s multi-faceted. She’s vain, beautiful, intelligent and yes, complicit. I write about the world of my experience, and it’s more complicated than, “that white man down the street is giving me a hard time.” That’s just one aspect of our reality. As Black people, we’re

encouraged to be narrow and simply address the race issue. We deserve much more.
(Williams C1)

Like Venus, Hester's subjectivity resists the narrow label of victim, which is *part* of her story, but does not define her. Her complicity and complexity open her up to being understood as a lover, a woman, a friend, and mother who is willing to do anything for her children's survival. Conversely, the more human Hester becomes the more Parks allows us to see the gaps that exist in our own humanity. Parks' plays often traffic in a fascination with gaps. In *The America Play* and *Top Dog/Underdog*, the gaps of history are brought to the fore and here, in *In the Blood*, it is the gaps of the heart as a society that are laid bare. As The Welfare Lady proclaims, "I care because it's my job. I am paid to stretch out these hands, Hester" (Parks 41). And, within these gaps of the heart, Parks is also asking us to question our own gaps of culpability in Hester's plight. What part do we play in constructing and maintaining Hester's journey? What is *in the blood* of our cultural DNA that allows for Hesters to exist at all?

With this in mind, *In the Blood*, like *The Scarlet Letter* before it, is a challenging and profound work that brings the stories of the margin to the center, ultimately forcing us to look at ourselves as a society and as individuals. That being said, scholar Peggy Phelan reminds us of the slippery slope of relying solely on the political strategy of visibility. Phelan argues that while, "there is a deeply ethical appeal in the desire for a more inclusive representational landscape," we must be mindful because, "the terms of this visibility often enervate the punitive power of these identities" (7). In other words, once we see the issue at hand there is often a societal impulse to judge the person, place, or thing being seen versus understanding *why* and *how* it exists at all. Phelan's words come to fruition in the final moments of the play, as the chorus, standing in for our contemporary society, shouts "LOOK AT HER! WHO DOES SHE THINK SHE IS?" (Parks 51) Just seeing the problem is not enough to change the results of this tragedy. So, as we sit cozy in the theatre on this cold winter night, the questions remain, what will be enough and where do we go from here?

Works Cited

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