

Essay

Everything You Know About Queerness You Learnt From Blackness

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Introducing The Afrika Theatre of Black Dykes, Crips, Kids and All Their Kin¹

By Mojisola Adebayo aka Susanne Kristensen

To be an African Scandinavian, a black Nigerian Dane, to be both Mojisola Adebayo and Susanne Kristensen, is a queer thing indeed. Queerness is a question mark, a raised eyebrow, a double-take that makes people think. Queerness is always on stage, in being looked at and looked at again, just like I was on the streets of Bogense, Fyn, as a black child in 1971. I am told that is a familiar experience for disabled people too. Claiming queerness is a celebration of strangeness, difference, non-normativity. Queerness is about un-boxing binaries of the body. And I learnt all I know about un-boxing from boxing's greatest: the Muslim magician and mischief-maker, the poet, pugilist, and peacemaker, athlete, artist and activist, disabled people's champion, the beautifully contradictory, butterfly and bee, my hero, Muhammad Ali.²

When the black heavyweight champ danced lightly on his toes and declared "I'm as pretty as a girl", he was playing with people's perceptions of what a black man could be (Hauser 1997: 52). Ali troubled gender stereotypes and racist beliefs about black masculinity being monolithic, inarticulate, savage even (Butler 1990; Wallace 1979). But the young Ali would not slug. He kept his hands at his hips and shuffled lightly on his feet; he danced – *backwards* – did magic tricks and recited poetry, until they took his licence away for refusing to go to Vietnam and shoot his fellow brown-skinned man. When he changed his name and his religion, from Christian Cassius Clay to Muslim Muhammad Ali, he undid the idea of what an American was supposed to be (and today government Trump would probably not let one of their greatest heroes into that country). As performance theorist Peggy Phelan has stated, "self invention and re-invention structures the performance of identities" (1993: 168). Muhammad Ali was a master of self-/re-invention, a

- 1) This essay is largely drawn from my Chapter in Alyson Campbell and Stephen Farrier (editors) *Queer Instruments: International Perspectives Where Performance Leads Queer* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan), 2015, entitled 'Everything You Know About Queerness You Learnt From Blackness: Introducing The Afrika Theatre of Black Dykes, Crips, Kids', pages 131-150, reproduced by kind permission of Palgrave Macmillan. I gratefully acknowledge my editors Alyson Campbell and Stephen Farrier, and Palgrave Macmillan, for the re-working and re-publication of substantial parts of this essay. The title of this essay is in homage to Patrick E. Johnson's "Quare" Studies, or (Almost) Everything I Know about Queer Studies I Learned from my Grandmother' (2007: 124). Like Johnson's formulation, my text strives to remedy the lack of attention given to race, disability and class in mainstream queer studies. However I use 'Quia' rather than 'Quare', as it is closer to my Nigerian heritage in pronunciation. The use of the term 'crip' (short for the derogatory term, 'cripple') that has been reclaimed by some disabled people, is used here in solidarity, with respect and in homage to Robert McRuer's *Crip Theory* (2006).
- 2) My semi-auto/biographical play *Muhammad Ali and Me* (Adebayo 2011: 65–149) was the first time I explored the relationship between and the inseparability of black and queer experience, including disability. It began as a 20-minute piece entitled *Dancing-Talking-Contra-Diction* (2001) at Royal Holloway, University of London, as part of my MA in Physical Theatre practice-as-research dissertation project. *Muhammad Ali and Me* was first staged at Ovalhouse Theatre in London in 2008, performed by Mojisola Adebayo, Charlie Folorunsho and British Sign Language performer, Jacqui Beckford, who creatively interprets the words for D/deaf people, and directed by Sheron Wray. It was revived at Albany Theatre, London in 2016 and is published by Oberon Books in *Mojisola Adebayo: Plays One*. See my website www.mojisolaadebayo.com *New Links to Past Shows* to see a recording of the work.

quintessentially queer quality. Ali was heterosexual, but he showed me that blackness and queerness do not need to be seen as sparring partners, but as dancing partners. And the music Ali loved to dance to most of all was that of a high-camp, “crip” (disabled), queer black man known as Little Richard (DeFrantz and Gonzales 2014: 169; McRuer 2006). I loved Little Richard so much as a child I named my first teddy bear after him. Somehow this curious Danish Nigerian kid raised in South-London knew that Little Richard was my kin.

Afriquia Theatre

Critical and creative black queerness that criss-crosses identities, blurs boundaries, exposes the “mythical norm”, messes with form, being in the process, playful, political and, most of all, performative (Lorde 1998: 631; Butler 1990), is the hallmark of my body of work that I call Afriquia Theatre.³ Afriquia Theatre is informed by the exciting burgeoning discourse of black/queer theory that has emerged over the early 21st century. Delroy Constantine-Simms’s *The Greatest Taboo: Homosexuality in Black Communities* (2011), E. Patrick Johnson and Mae G. Henderson’s *Black Queer Studies* (2007), and Sokari Ekine and Hakima Abbas’s *Queer African Reader* (2013), E. Patrick Johnson’s *No Tea, No Shade: Writings on Black Queer Studies* (2016) are five notable edited anthologies. However, these books contain largely theoretical writings from African and/or American perspectives. There has been very little discussion of black queer theatre and performance from a British (or European) queer/performance perspective, which is dominated by white voices that pay surprisingly little attention to black artists. As theatre scholar Victor Ukaegbu asserts: “British queer theatre is white, not black and, though tolerant of black performers, it hardly serves black concerns” (2007: 329 and 331). Ukaegbu also notes the marked “ambivalence” (322) in black studies towards black queer theatre but, despite being largely ignored, “black gay performances have been flourishing underground” (2007: 329).⁴ In the past few years, we have seen a locally active and internationally resonant radical black/queer cultural renaissance and political resistance happening on London stages in particular. From fringe theatres voicing the margins, such as Ovalhouse and the Albany, to iconic main houses in the history of British political theatre such as Theatre Royal Stratford East and the Royal Court; from small spoken-word events to nationally recognised arts centres of the *avant garde* such as the Southbank Centre. Black queer performance is becoming and coming up strong from where I am based in Britain.

Afriquia Theatre is therefore inspired by the work of my black British/ British-based performance-making ancestors and peers who include Rikki Beadle-Blair, Jackie Kay, Valerie Mason-John, Christopher Rodriguez, Joy Gharoro-Akpojotor, Ade Adeniji, Le Gateau Chocolat, Antonia Kemi Coker and Tonderai Munyevu, Paul Boyake, Kofi Agyemang, Reuben Massiah, Dorothea Smartt, Dean Atta, Stephanie ‘Sonority’ Turner, David Ellington, Tarrell Alvin-Mcraney, Jacqueline Rudet, Deobia Oparei, Steven Luckie, Inua Ellams, Topher Campbell, Zodwa Nyoni, stand-up comedians Stephen K. Amos and Gina Yashere and former stage-manager now leading scholar of black-British theatre, Dr Lynette Goddard, to name just a few.⁵ This essay, then, seeks to counter

3) Afriquia = African / Black and Queer, pronounced with a West African accent, ‘Quia’.

4) *Staging Black Feminisms* (2007) by Britain’s only other black British lesbian theatre scholar, Dr Lynette Goddard, is an important exception.

5) Many of these artists have also published plays. They do not all necessarily use the terms LGBTQIA+ to identify themselves but they have all made work that openly and positively represents black queer experience. There have also been recent works by white playwrights representing black queer experience

what queer cultural critic Jasbir K. Puar notes as the “racism of the global gay left” (2007: xi) that I argue permeates queer theatre and performance studies. Furthermore, noting how many of the artists mentioned above are male, through Afriquia Theatre, I hope to go some way to addressing what feminist performance theorist Sue-Ellen Case has discussed as the queer erosion of lesbian representation (2009: 9–11), by positioning lesbian stories centre stage. I write in part to give more parts to women, black and disabled actors. Representation in all respects is an important function of my work.

Functional Performativity

On this subject of functionality, Thomas DeFrantz writes in *Black Performance Theory* that “black is action. Action engaged to enlarge capacity, confirm presence, to dare” (2014: 5). Similarly, African theatre scholars Osita Okagbue and Kene Igweonu assert that “African theatre and performance is functional” in that “it is not just entertainment but is often geared towards fulfilling particular social or aesthetic functions – hence it is performative at its core” (2014: 1–2). A recurring feature of black performance is the desire to bring something into being through the act of doing, whether it be through ritual or activism, towards education, empowerment and/or social change. As performativity is a key concept of gender/queer theory (Butler 1990), it can be used as a frame through which to view blackness and queer experience together.

For Paul Gilroy, “[s]urvival in slave regimes or in other extreme conditions intrinsic to colonial order promoted the acquisition of what we might now consider to be performance skills” in everyday black life (1995: 14). He cites enslaved African-Americans such as Frederick Douglass and Ellen Craft, who escaped from slavery through transvestism. Performing white and playing straight in everyday life is a phenomenon practised by both black and queer peoples, as cultural theorists Maria Sanchez and Linda Schlossberg demonstrate in their book *Passing* (2001). Major postcolonial scholars have discussed how performance elements such as mimicry (Bhabha 1998) and the mask (Fanon 1986) have become defining features of black experience and demonstrate the damaging effect these affectations can have on the psyche and behavioural patterns of the colonised. Black and queer performance modes have been both instruments of harm and instruments through which liberation has been fashioned and, indeed, been made fashionable. Camp, at the nexus of performance and fashion in contemporary western black and queer cultures, is possibly the most prolific and high-profile, both defiant and flamboyant, mode of cultural expression that we share.⁶ From the fast fingers and hair flicks of rocking and rolling Little Richard to the shaking bananas on the booty of Josephine Baker; from the high flat-top of Grace Jones to the high heels of RuPaul;

such as Robin Soans, whose *Perseverance Drive*, first performed at the Bush Theatre, in London in July 2014, deals with homophobia in a black family. Kate Tempest’s *Hopelessly Devoted*, first performed at Birmingham Rep in September 2013, focuses on a black lesbian relationship in prison.

6) Queer theorist Kathryn Bond Stockton identifies dark camp as one of the ‘aesthetic delight[s]’ (Stockton 2006: 24) that has been fostered from shared black/queer feeling of shame. I am weary and wary of the recent western tendency in queer theory toward placing black and queer people in the depressing paradigm of shame; I am much more interested and invested in the more positive approach of black cultural studies scholars, such as bell hooks, who explore self-love (hooks 2001). I am further animated by the activism articulated by the likes of Epprecht (2013). I cannot see how indulging in the discourse of shame and failure is going to win LGBTQIA+ equality in Africa, for example. I am tired of the repeated clichéd image of faceless and down-faced black gay men that appear all over Stockton’s book. I would rather look directly into the eyes of the South African LGBTQIA+ people celebrated in the photography of Zanele Muholi who have no time in the fight for equality to delight in shame. They are too busy surviving (Muholi, 2010).

from the 35 year purple reign of shoulder-padded Prince to the practice of voguing at drag balls from Harlem to Liverpool, who can say where queer begins and black ends? Or where crip sensibility ends and queer performance begins? Little Richard recalls: “The kids didn’t realise I was crippled. They thought I was trying to twist and walk feminine. But I had to take short strides cos I had a little leg . . . The kids would call me faggot, sissy, freak punk.” (DeFrantz and Gonzales 2014: 169). Little Richard performed his body, scorned as “deformed”, as the ultimate dandy, the daddy of rock and roll. And where would white gay boys have been since the 1970s without the dancefloor anthems of black divas performatively bringing into being the feeling that “*We Are Family...*”.⁷ We – black, queer, crip people – are family, indeed. In this way, we exhibit and encourage *ubuntu*, a central concept of Afrika Theatre.

Ubuntu

Ubuntu is an ancient Southern African, Zulu and Xhosa word for which there is no precise equivalent in the English language. It broadly means the capacity to recognize humanity in each other. I am me through you, you are you through me. Or as Muhammad Ali said to graduating Harvard students when asked to give them a poem, “Me, We” (the shortest poem in history).⁸ When applied to discrimination on the basis of race, sexuality and disability, *ubuntu* holds a very powerful message. African theory scholar Lebamang J. Sebidi sites the lyrics of a song by the popular South African singer and composer Brenda Fassie, *Umuntu Ngumuntu Ngabantu* (a person is a person through other persons) as having helped to “popularise what forms the very kernel of *Ubuntu* as this basic orientation. What the above venerable axiom says is that, one’s humanity, one’s person-hood is dependent upon one’s relationship with others” (Sebidi, 1998: 62). I want to do in theatre what the brilliant Brenda Fassie, a black lesbian artist and activist, did in music, by championing *ubuntu*. I want my theatre to make spaces for black queer people to see our experiences reflected and for non-black and non-LGBTQIA+ people to gain more understanding, empathy and solidarity with us and celebration in us. The anti-apartheid spiritual leader and campaigner for the rights of LGBTQIA+ people in South Africa, Archbishop Desmond Tutu writes: “*Ubuntu* is the recognition of humanity in one another. This is not just a nice thought or sentimental set of words in South Africa. *Ubuntu* is our defining concept: *I exist because you exist.*” (Lief, 2015: x).

Diaspora

Lastly, diaspora, as both a material experience and a concept, is constantly evolving a map where blackness and queerness interconnect. DeFrantz and Gonzales write that “Diaspora is continual; it is the unfolding of experience into a visual, aural, kinaesthetic culture of performance” (2014: 11). Diaspora has been intrinsic to black cultural expression, ever since the forced movements of slavery and the chosen movements of migration transported the rhythms of West Africa to the West Indies and on to West London’s Notting Hill Carnival. Queerness too has a diasporic quality: Sedgwick writes that “[q]ueer is a continuing moment, movement, motive...The word “queer” itself means across” (1994: xii). Like Simone De Beauvoir’s conceptualisation of not being born but becoming woman (in Butler 1990), Paul Gilroy has written that “[d]iaspora accentuates becoming rather than being” (1995: 24). Queer cultural critics Cindy Patton and Benigno Sanchez-Eppler

7) ‘We Are Family’ (1979) is a popular disco song by the black female band, Sister Sledge. The song was often played in gay clubs from the late 1970s onwards. It was composed by Bernard Edwards and Nile Rodgers and first released on the Cotillion label.

8) See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2juMXfgHmvU>.

have written on the link between diaspora and queer becoming, stating: “Sexuality is not only not essence, not timeless, it is also not fixed in place; sexuality is on the move” (2000: 2). The struggles for black emancipation and LGBTQIA+ equality are movements. We have fought by moving our bodies and acting out our passions, protesting and performing on streets and stages across oceans and seas.

I am a British-born Danish-Nigerian. My performance work has taken me all over the world, from Antarctica to Zimbabwe. Plays gathered under the moniker Afriquia Theatre have travelled, through full productions, excerpts and workshops, to Accra, Beijing, Belfast, Berlin, Birmingham, Cape Town, Huddersfield, Liverpool, London, Madison, Princeton, Singapore and Soweto. They are performed by black/queer/disabled artists from across the diaspora: from Cape Horn to the Caribbean, from the Bight of Benin to the island of Britain. They move globally online and now they travel through you. In a time of increasing persecution of LGBTQIA+ people on the African continent and the Caribbean, coupled with the ongoing battle against HIV/AIDS – a shared African/diasporic and LGBTQIA+ struggle – it is all the more important to recognise and acknowledge that black and queer are a/kin.

I am going to share two extracts from my most recent Afriquia Theatre plays, namely *I Stand Corrected* and *Asara and the Sea-Monstress*.⁹ These plays, in very different ways, the former for adults and the latter for children, through physical theatre and metaphor and myth respectively, create accessible spaces for black/queer/crip togetherness towards understanding, debating and challenging the recent intensification of homophobic colonial laws and violent acts across the African continent and the diaspora (Epprecht 2013).¹⁰ Both plays feature female protagonists, both plays are set in Africa and link homophobia to colonialism, both of these extracts challenge the state and criminal in/justice and most importantly of all, both projects, with workshops, talks and writing around them, seek to nurture in its audiences a sense of black queer *ubuntu*. I begin with *I Stand Corrected*, a love story.

***I Stand Corrected* (extract)**

I Stand Corrected (ISC) is a collaboration between dancer/choreographer Mamela Nyamza and me as playwright, actor and co-director. It was first performed at Artscape Theatre, Cape Town, South Africa, in August 2012, with design by Rajha Shakiry, lighting by Mannie Manim and music supervised by Debo Adebayo of Mix ‘n’ Sync and had a London premiere at Ovalhouse Theatre in 2012. ISC is a response to the so-called ‘corrective’ hate rape and violence against lesbians and transmen in South Africa, and the anti-gay marriage voices in Britain who directed so much emotional violence against LGBTQIA+ people.

9) These Afriquia plays and critical writing form part of my PhD project at Queen Mary University of London (QMUL). I gratefully acknowledge the support of QMUL and my supervisor Dr Catherine Silverstone and my advisor Dr Caoimhe McAvinchey. Extracts from these unpublished plays are provided by permission of the author named Mojisola Adebayo and may not be performed in public without permission from the author. If you wish to perform these extracts or if you require full manuscripts, contact me directly on mojisolaadebayo@hotmail.com.

10) Marc Epprecht makes a galvanising case for optimism about the struggle for sexual equality in Africa that is a growing grassroots movement, led by women, men and LGBTQIA African people across the continent.

The play features Zodwa (played by Nyamza), a black South African lesbian woman who (we later realise) has come back from the dead, arising from a rubbish bin on what was supposed to be the morning of her wedding, after she has been raped and murdered in a township alleyway by a group of homophobic men who want to 'make her straight'. Zodwa/Mamela uses dance and movement to explore physically what it means to be a 'corrected' woman. Charlie (played by me) is her British bride-to-be, left confused and worried, waiting at the altar of a township church hall in front of the wedding guests/audience. Charlie goes out to find her lost lover, and in this excerpt she is returning to the wedding hall where she directly addresses the guests/audience. The excerpt can be played as a duologue or as a solo, with Zodwa brought alive by Charlie's imagination. The full production, filmed by South African queer artist, Shelley Barry, can be found online at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WjjiOutaH9Q> and www.mojisolaadebayo.com. 11

Charlie and the policeman

CHARLIE: I've just come from the police station. Do you want to know what the officer said?

ZODWA (as policeman): "She probably went to find an African man to marry her instead".

CHARLIE: I said, what?

ZODWA (as policeman): "She cannot marry a woman, it's unnatural, this thing, this thing . . ."

CHARLIE: . . . and slurps his tea. I said "we are supposed to be flying to London in an AEROPLANE. But I guess that's unnatural too isn't it? People, flying in the sky like birds". Zodwa always says . . .

ZODWA: Charlie, if God had meant us to fly, he would have melted wax on our backs and fixed on feathers!

(They both laugh).

CHARLIE: We're going to miss our plane . . . The policeman says:

ZODWA (as policeman): "It's not our culture, it's not African".

CHARLIE: I said, well we are getting married today in an *African* church. But now that I think about it church isn't very African either is it? There's nothing African about Christianity. (*The DJ/ Stage Man- ager, apparently offended by what Charlie is saying, tries to interrupt her speech by bringing in Township Funk music. Charlie fights back by rapping/playing with the text on the mic as Zodwa dances in a crump- ing style*). Well Jesus was Jewish, except all the paintings make him look Dutch! The irony is, my parents, my 'white adopted parents' that is, helped bring Christianity to this country. Met in Africa as missionaries in the 1960s. Spent their honeymoon soaking up the sun on 'whites only' beaches in Cape Town. Had a splendid time and Daddy even made money in the mineral mines. Made an absolute killing in phosphorus. Policeman says, "What?" Phosphorus, you know, the stuff on matches? I presume that's how a humble Vicar and his clinically depressed wife could afford to give a private education to an abandoned brown baby in Stratford-upon-Avon. Except all I was interested in was playing cricket! (*DJ gives up the battle and brings the music*

11) For further critical commentary on *I Stand Corrected*, see an interview in Caoimhe McAviney (2014) and my chapter 'Revolutionary Beauty out of Homophobic Hate: A Reflection on the Performance *I Stand Corrected*' in Gareth White (2015). For a quick visual impression of the live show, see Lisa Fingleton's five-minute short film *A Conversation with Mamela Nyamza and Mojisola Adebayo* on <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qMAwbAp6C1U>. For a more extensive insight into the work, see Sue Giovanni's 27-minute film on *I Stand Corrected* <http://vimeo.com/80282830>. A full-length documentary featuring *I Stand Corrected* in its entirety by film-maker Shelley Barry and produced by the British Council is available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WjjiOutaH9Q>. This is also available on my website www.mojisolaadebayo.com 'New Links to Past Shows'.

down slightly, Charlie more gently now, looking at Zodwa) And *that's* how I got the chance to come to Cape Town myself, where I met my girlfriend – my *fiancée*: Zodwa Ndlovu. And I Lovyu. It's how I remember the spelling. I'm taking her name. Charlotte – Charlie Ndlovu. My birth mother actually named me Donna. I fantasise that my dad was in the West Indies cricket team. Donna Ndlovu. Got a ring to it don't you think? He doesn't even pick up his pen but gulps back his tea, licks his lips and proceeds to stare at my non-existent cleavage. Well I lean forward to give the police officer a closer view: Yes my white Daddy came back from South Africa whispering all sorts of stories about what the savages got up to in their huts. *(DJ, offended again, jacks the music back up)*. Oh sorry have I offended your African sensibility? You don't think white people invented sex like they did aeroplanes do you? Sorry to disappoint you but apparently Africa is the cradle of civilisation so all these same sex shenanigans must have started somewhere. I think you'll find that being a lesbian is as South African as Rooibosch tea! *(Music cuts. Charlie moves away from the mic and into the space, now having a conversation with Zodwa in her mind)*. People like my parents imported *homophobia* – not homosexuality. And the Europeans brought all kinds of other clever inventions with them – concentration camps, genocide . . .

ZODWA: ...apartheid.

CHARLIE: Are those things African too?

ZODWA (as policeman): "It is in the Bible! It is forbidden!"

CHARLIE: – well so is eating PRAWNS! *(They start to gently act out getting into bed, using Zodwa's wedding dress as a bed cover)*. Working on a Saturday, sitting next to a woman who's on her period and a baby boy still having a foreskin dangling after he's 8 days old – not to mention biblical justifications for the slave trade – but let's pick and choose the rules shall we? Stuff the tricky bits in Leviticus about menstruation, shellfish, slavery, Sabbath rest and excess penis flesh – let's persecute the sodomites instead. Well, I don't know about you but I've never been that into sodomy myself. No, I know I have tried lubrication – the officer's eyes start to widen. But I hear anal sex is an excellent *heterosexual* contraception. Particularly popular with the Catholic population, you should try it sometime – but always use a condom won't you? *(Gently, to Zodwa in bed, recounting the conversation with the policeman)*. Unnatural. I'll tell you what's really unnatural. Forcing your cock into a woman's cunt. That is unnatural, that is un-African. So are you going to look for Zodwa Ndlovu or not? *(Charlie and Zodwa fall asleep for a moment and then jump up, back to reality, Charlie at the mic addressing the guests again)*. Now the policeman doesn't seem too happy about my tone of voice. True I could have been a bit more diplomatic but it's been a very difficult day and as the beads of sweat are crystalising around his crucifix he looks deep into my eyes...deep into my eyes... And I have never felt so white . . .

(Excerpt cuts to...Charlie on her knees whispering into the mic, hands in prayer position as Zodwa moves on top of the bin, her back to the audience, in a stylised sequence drawing on the moves of a cricket umpire. Fauré's requiem plays softly).

CHARLIE: The policeman says . . . "I think you still have time to catch your plane back to England". Ah yes, our pretty little island. We actually wanted to get married in my father's parish. Mum might have even got up from bed to bake us a cake. The only problem is daddy is one of those angry Anglicans who stands in his pulpit on a Sunday morning to preach that gay marriage will destroy the Church of England. Ironic coming from an institution that was started by Henry the 8th – a man who murdered two of his six wives and broke from the Pope because he wanted a divorce. Still, he did invent cricket and that's evidently all I'm good for. Poor dad, and he thought he was singeing his white guilt by adopting a little half-breed nigger like me. What a disappointment

I turned out to be. What a waste of all those minerals. So we would have got married in England, but we can't. (*A beat. Music snaps out. Charlie grabs the mic now like a stand up comedian, while Zodwa pulls at the wedding balloons*). Personally I blame the Royal family. You see if they allowed gay marriage it would mean a queen could marry a queen (*they laugh*). Then where would we be? No no no, a faggot in the Royal family would end up as dead as a . . .

ZODWA: Dodi.

CHARLIE: That would be even worse than Princess Diana marrying an Arab. A Muslim?! They'd have to put the brakes on that one. So that's why we decided to get married here, in South Africa, the rainbow nation, symbol of forgiveness and reconciliation, where equal rights are enshrined in your glorious constitution. Except it's not that simple is it? So tell me nice Mr Policeman, where are we supposed to go? Perhaps I should thank you: if this were Nigeria, Uganda or just about anywhere else in Africa I'd be the one under arrest. Are you going to look for her? (*Silence*). Where is my wife? Go home . . . I think everybody should just . . . go home. (*Charlie exits. Zodwa draws a face on a balloon, it is the face of her killer. She now realises what has happened to her*).

ZODWA: I stand corrected. Is this what you wanted?... (*monologue continues*).

Asara and the Sea-Monstress (extract)

Asara and the Sea-Monstress is a play for children from four years old up to adults. It had staged readings at Birmingham REP in 2012 and at the Albany Theatre in August 2014 (and we are currently seeking partner to mount the full production). I wanted to find a way of talking about homosexuality and homophobia, through an inclusive accessible black aesthetic, with small children, their families and friends. I decided to work through metaphor. *Asara* is about a left-handed girl growing up in the mythical West African right-handed Kingdom of Dexphoria. *Asara* addresses homophobia, discrimination and difference through the metaphor of left-handedness, merging Nigerian, Danish and Greenlandic myths and folk tales. *Asara* is also the first all-black British cast to integrate black performers who are disabled and D/deaf and to creatively integrate British Sign Language. In this way, the play merges 'crip', queer and black theory and practice, challenging in the theatre what Robert McRuer has termed "compulsory ablebodiedness" (2006: 8). McRuer urges that: "we need a postidentity politics of sorts, but a postidentity politics that allows us to work together, one that acknowledges the complex and contradictory histories of our various movements, drawing on and learning from those histories rather than transcending them." (2006: 202). *Asara* is about working together and if, like some of the actors in *Asara*, you are black and gay and disabled, McRuer's approach is all the more crucial.

In this excerpt, Asara has drawn the winning portrait for King Dexter in his new 'robes'. Dexter has actually been tricked by Witches into wearing an outfit that can only be seen by the very brave and the very wise (he is wearing nothing at all though his nudity is disguised by playful stage blocking). In this way I blend my Danish heritage into my West African storytelling by drawing on Hans Christian Andersen's *The Emperor's New Clothes*. Asara goes on to sign her portrait with her left hand. She is swiftly arrested for doing so. The only one who might be able to save her is the powerful Sea-Monstress, a girl named Toshun (based on the Nigerian, Yoruba goddess / Orisha Oshun) who did not want to marry Prince Dexter and so gave him her literal hand in marriage instead. After chopping her own hand off, she bathed her bloody stump in the river, fell into the water and transformed into the Sea-Monstress (based on the Greenlandic folk tale figure Sasumma Aarnaa). Dexter was so angry with Toshun that he made being left-handed a crime. But the Sea-

Monstress is still secretly worshipped by the left-handed Witches who believe she will one day save the Kingdom. This is the scene where Asara is put on trial.

The trial

COURTIER: How do you plead?

ASARA: Not guilty!

COURTIER: Barrister for the Prosecution.

BARRISTER: (Bows to KING DEXTER, turns to ASARA): State your name.

ASARA: You know it already.

BARRISTER: For the record.

ASARA: Asara Tennant.

BARRISTER: A little unusual isn't it?... Asara... Apparently the origins of the word are (*looking at his evidence*) 'troublesome, sinister – left-handed'.

ASARA: Well I didn't name myself!

BARRISTER: Indeed. (*Looking up at MAMA and PAPA in the gallery*).

ASARA: Anyway, it just goes to show I've been this way since I was born.

BARRISTER: So you admit to being left-handed?

ASARA: I'm not a criminal! I demand my rights!

BARRISTER: Left-handedness is not a human right but a human *vice*. It is not normal.

ASARA: It's not normal to be right-handed, it's just COMMON. I bet there are lots of left-handed people out there just like me . . .

(*ASARA looks to the audience, engages them through improv 'is anyone else left-handed like me?' If anyone responds, BARRISTER improvises some banter with them, 'you'll be on trial next' etc. COURTIER will bring the court to order*).

BARRISTER: Using your left hand is perverted!

ASARA: But WHY?

(*BARRISTER is uncomfortable, not sure whether he should say why*).

BARRISTER: It is only to be used for . . . dirty jobs.

ASARA: What jobs?

BARRISTER: Big jobs.

ASARA: Well let's ban them too shall we? (*ASARA marching and chanting*).

Ban bums, ban bums, prosecute all who poo!

If you do do-do then we'll do for you!

COURTIER: ORDER!

(*GUARD restrains ASARA*).

BARRISTER: Left-handedness is of the other side. Over there they even drive on the left side of the road and read and write from left to right – it's absurd!

ASARA: Maybe I should go and live with them then!

MAMA: Don't send her away!

ASARA: Why not Mama? Life would be a lot easier. Do they clap with both hands over there because I like doing that as well YAY!

(*ASARA claps with both hands – also illegal*).

BARRISTER: You see, everything about this creature is unnatural!

ASARA: If it's so unnatural how come nature doesn't have a problem with it?

BARRISTER: Explain?

ASARA: Bring in Majit the cat and I'll show you!

COURTIER: Call Majit the cat!

(MAJIT the cat is brought in by the WITCHES and given milk to drink. He drinks then dips his left paw in the milk and licks it).

ASARA: See!

YAGI *(Asara's friend)*: Way to go Majit!

COURTIER: Silence!

BARRISTER: This despicable practice is not acceptable in the human race!

ASARA: Well then I'd rather be a cat! Meeeeeow!

BARRISTER: A sign of witch-craft! She works against God.

ASARA: I was made this way!

BARRISTER: You are left-handed because you love to sin! You are just an insolent exhibitionist!

ASARA: Well at least I don't prance around in public showing off my privates!

KING DEXTER: I've heard enough! CHOP IT OFF! CHOP HER HAND OFF!

MAMA & PAPA: NO!!!

(GUARD takes ASARA down from the stand and dragged to the executioner's block. She struggles.

YAGI runs up to the WITCHES).

YAGI: You've got to do something!

WITCHES: Sea-Goddess! See Goddess! Witness injustice! Witness injustice!

(The SEA-MONSTRESS rides in on a huge wave).

WITCHES: TSUNAMI! RUN!!!! *(Everyone scatters).*

GUARD: What about the girl?

KING DEXTER: Lock her up in the tower!

LORD LAND: Come on!

To sum up

So black dykes, crips, kids, your comrades, allies and all your diasporic kin – the future of Afrikaia theatre is yours. This is your beginners' call. You've got the likes of Muhammad Ali in your prompt corner. In you I see the curtain fall on all mythical compulsory normativities. Play on, with more pleasure and more power than ever before. May your theatres be places of *ubuntu*. *Amandla awethu!* – the future is yours!

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