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New York-based dramaturg Arminda Thomas is currently in rehearsals for Nambi Kelley's adaptation of the Toni Morrison novel Jazz, which premieres at Baltimore Center Stage next month.
How did you get hired for this project?

I met Nambi Kelley, who is writing the adaptation, through *Going to the River*. She was featured in last summer’s festival, and she was a member of our first River Writers Unit. She had gotten the commission to adapt *Jazz* earlier in the year and had written a few drafts before I came into the process. I’m a Toni Morrison fan, which is not uncommon, and a fan of the book (which apparently is slightly less common), and so we began to talk, casually, about the book … and suddenly she was asking Center Stage to hire me on as her dramaturg.

With this being a world premiere, an adaptation of a well-known novel, and a period piece, can you describe the dramaturgical needs?

One of the distinctive things about the novel is its structure, which Morrison describes as an attempt to make the work itself a manifestation of jazz. So a large part of the process has been discovering a structure for the play that honors that intent, looking at other works (like *Rashomon*) that play with telling a simple story through a multifocal lens. Because the underlying story of *Jazz* (the melody, as Morrison describes it) is simple enough that she tells it on the first page, in the first paragraph. And she takes that tale, fit for a tabloid in the “present-day” of Harlem 1926, and steeps every character involved in history that goes back almost a century, reflecting the African-American journey through slavery’s end, and the broken promise of Reconstruction, to the beginning of the Great Migration and Harlem Renaissance. Most of that history isn’t going to make it onto the stage, even in allusions, but I have worked to make it available to the actors and I’m current (feverishly) working on program notes to provide some historical context for the audience.

What are some of your most exciting discoveries you've encountered in your research?

What information, if any, has been challenging to track down?

I would say that what’s really fun for me is the breadth of research. Today’s rehearsal, for instance, called for images of 19th-century contraceptive devises in one hour and information on policy games the next. And the music. *Jazz* is not a musical—and Morrison never uses the word “jazz”—but music runs through the book in ways both blatant and subtle. Something that struck me as I re-encountered the book for this project is how much Morrison uses song lyrics—some from real songs (jazz, blues, even folk songs), some she mixes together, some she invented. And those lyrics often tell us a lot about the emotional state of the characters. Tracking those lyrics and finding recordings of the songs referenced has been both very challenging and really fun.

You also have the *Going to the River* Festival coming up. Can you describe your role in that project?

I am the dramaturg for the River Writers Unit and Associate Artistic Director for the festival. Elizabeth Van Dyke (co-founder and Artistic Director) and I are still working out the details for this
Can you speak a bit about *Tranquil*, which is receiving its world premiere at Luna Stage?

*Tranquil* is about 18-year-old Ellen, who was paralyzed in a car accident that killed her mother. When Aaron -- her brother who was driving at the time of the accident -- returns home two years later, the siblings and their father, Rick, have to confront the emotional injuries they haven’t dealt with so they can start to heal as a family.
You've been with this project for a long time. How does your sustained investment in the piece affect how you and the playwright work together?

My long-term investment has not only been in *Tranquil*, but in Andrew — we’ve worked together on a number of his plays since early on in his career so I’ve had both a close-up and a big-picture view of the evolution of his writing. That involvement with the history of his work gives me an in-depth understanding of his voice, his writing, and his process.

We’ve come to know each other well as collaborators and as friends. We’re able to skip the preliminary stages of new artistic collaborations: getting to know one another and establishing a relationship, shared vocabulary, and trust; and getting on the same page regarding the meaning and intent of the play. Instead, we’re able to engage immediately when he writes a new play or draft in an in-depth exploration of the dramatic heart, skeleton, and "DNA" of the work — the emotion that gives it life, its inherent structure, and the core idea (and related ideas) that reveals its intention — along with its specific events, character arcs, rules, patterns and metaphors, etc.

My dramaturgical collaboration with him has been an ongoing and open conversation about all of his plays as they’ve been written and re-written over the years. At times he leads the conversation, asking the questions most pressing to him; at other times, I take the lead, asking questions, making observations, pointing out both potential problems and potential opportunities he hasn’t seen on his own, and relating details to the whole and vice versa. I don’t have to be insecure about doing “hands-on” dramaturgy: he invites my suggestions, we brainstorm together to solve tangled script issues, I’m direct in giving (copious) notes.

We’re both always motivated by our shared stakes in the storytelling and in achieving Andrew’s intentions for any particular play through his honest and authentic voice as a writer.

Where there any breakthroughs or “a-ha!” moments during the process?
Over five years? There were many! To speak of one: the perspective in 2014 of the actress Regan Linton, who is a wheelchair-user, on Ellen’s action late in the play was illuminating. It highlights how crucial the input was of persons with disabilities in ensuring that the play isn’t about living with a disability—that the disability doesn’t define Ellen. It’s about a broken family still reeling from an accident that injured them all, and trying to find their way back together.

Has your work on this project made an impact on your own dramaturgical process or unlocked new ways to approach future material?
Because of the challenges the play makes to a theatre and an audience, Andrew has been pressured over the years to revise aspects of *Tranquil*. So it has just been a constant
reminder to me of a principle I hope I always actualize: trust the process and remain true to the playwright’s vision—that’s how the play will develop at its own pace and eventually find some fierce supporters who move it on to production.

Interview by Megan McClain

events

May 6 - LMDA and TACTICS present the Creator Exchange in Ottawa. For playwrights, directors, and dramaturgs in the Ottawa area looking to make new connections. Info and sign-up form here.

June 22-24 - 2017 LMDA Conference: Access, Activism & Art, Berkeley, CA