

WE ARE PROUD TO PRESENT: JACKIE SIBBLIES DRURY



Sebastian Venuat

Recently, Company One Theatre dramaturg Ramona Ostrowski spoke with playwright Jackie Sibblies Drury about the native challenges of creating and developing a piece with charged subject matter, and the translations it requires across history, time and space.

Where did the inspiration for WE ARE PROUD TO PRESENT A PRESENTATION... come from? Was it the subject matter or the form that first interested you?

It was definitely the subject matter. I came across the subject matter really randomly. I was trying to research a different play, and I googled black people and Germany and then found out that there was a genocide and I had never heard of it before. So I did a bunch of research on that and in trying to write a play sort of more directly about that I think that I didn't write a very good play--I sort of failed at writing a play--and that became the inspiration for the form of the play that it actually is now.

Can you tell me about the development and production history of the play?

I started researching it when I was living in Chicago right before going to graduate school, and I wrote the first draft of it as my graduate thesis when I was at Brown. We had a workshop production that I was really proud of, and then I ended up submitting it to a theater festival that happens in Chicago at a theater called Victory Gardens. They have a festival for emerging playwrights of color under 40. The way that the festival used to function was that they would accept six plays and do a weekend of readings that was really fun and festive and they would then workshop two of those six plays and they agreed that they would then produce one of them on their main stage, which is really rare because I think that there's not a lot of open submission things or things that are a series of readings where you might get a production out of it. So that was really exciting, and that was also where I met Eric Ting who is now a friend and a close collaborator. So we worked together on that production. From there I was in a writers group at a theater in New York called SoHo Rep and I knew people at that theater and it ended up fitting into their next season and so then it came to New York and Eric and I were able to do a very, very different production of it there. And now it gets to go to Boston which I'm pretty excited about!

We're really excited to have it here! I know that you were involved with the Chicago and New York productions. How does it feel now that it's having these other productions where you're not involved?

I mean to be totally honest it's super weird. I'm excited that people are going to see the play, and people that wouldn't have otherwise been able to see it are going to see it. But there's something that is a little bit disconcerting. I mean, to put on a play is a beautiful thing but it's also a time-intensive, emotionally-intensive, labor-intensive thing to do. And so thinking about all these people working on something and that I'm not there to support them at all is a little bit discomfiting. But it's also exciting to get to see a different theater artist's interpretation and a different direction and also a different interpretation by performers. It's the highest compliment you can get as a playwright, to have people create a successful production out of work that you have worked on intensively for a number of years. So it's exciting.

How were the first couple of performances with an audience? The piece is so open-ended; were there surprises in there for you?

I think I was surprised by how nervous I was. I think that the first couple performances--the previews that were in Chicago--the audiences were pretty polarized, but I don't think that that was that surprising to me. There was some reaction to the play where people didn't know what to do with that openness, and felt unguided or uncared for and didn't think that it was a dramatic work, and that I think is something that was sort of interesting and kind of exciting to think about: getting the chance to sort of expose people to a different way to telling a story or a different way of interacting with a play. It was exciting.

Can you talk to me a little bit about the end of the play? What do you hope to accomplish by leaving so much of it in the hands of the actors?

Yeah, I mean, it's probably really a silly thing to do, but I also think that there's so much about live performance that I respond to that's not necessarily about the words that are being spoken, but by the stage picture or the mood in the room, and so as a playwright it's pretty frustrating because all I get are the words. I think that when I see something that's particularly moving or powerful, it's often not something that I associate

with a particular line in the performance, and so I wanted to find a way, or to hope, that a production or a group of people, if they're excited enough about the play and excited and intrigued and challenged by that openness of an ending, that they'll find that way to have it feel like an invitation to the audience to sort of see this person and empathize in a room, and I think that if that happens, even for a few people, I think that's pretty amazing. The subject matter is so dark and the treatment of it is so ironic and then unironic, I really was wary of trying to have an ending wall note to the play, where it's sort of like "and that's why genocide is bad." There's nothing really to say in the face of the most awful thing that we can imagine human beings doing to other human beings. So I feel like every ending just felt like this moralizing, and I just wanted it to be as open and complicated as thinking about the big idea can be.

This play is being produced this season at the Bush Theatre in London. How, if at all, do you think it's going to play differently to a non-American audience?

We've been talking about that. I'm going to be going to London for some of the rehearsals, which is going to be super fun, I'm really excited! I'm excited to go to London because it's like London, but I think that part of the reason that the director and the theater would like me there is because the director, named Gbolahan [Obisesan], who is awesome and smart and a playwright in his own right, has already made the decision that the actors are going to be British, they're not going to be English people pretending to be American, and so there's some small...like no one says "elevator," but they would change it to a lift! But we're still talking about what the accent slip is going to mean, and whether it should be a different kind of accent. It's an ongoing conversation about how much should be rewritten and recontextualized.

That makes sense, because it's not as though the UK doesn't have a complicated history of race relations, but it's very different than our own.

Yeah, there's a huge colonization empire, but there weren't plantations in England; there wasn't that kind of slave economy. It's just a totally different racial understanding. But I do think that there is still a lot of racism in England, and so I think the main thrust of the play will still work, but it's just figuring out what to change so that it feels effective and relevant to people in London.

What is the worst way to do this play?

I think that the worst way to do the play is to assume that the audience is stupid. Super blunt, but it means that the worst way to do it is to explain all the connections and tie up all of the... to fix it. Because I feel like the play is broken a little bit on purpose, and I think that the space in it is where people can enter it and have a creative, empathetic response, and also a critical, rational, creative experience. Whereas if the play gets over-explained it sort of breaks it in a way.

You said the play is "broken." Can you say a little more about that?

To me the play sort of combines two different events, or two different forms of discrimination. And I don't think that it equates them, but I do think that it puts them next to each other on the same plate. And the actors get confused about it, and I hope that the audience gets confused about it too because I certainly feel confused about it! The slippage of one sort of racial relation into another, there is a buildup to me but there's no cause and effect. The equation of the play is not an equation that works. I think that's what I mean by it being broken. It just, is. I think that was all very cryptic and vague and maybe slightly pretentious.

When I was doing research, there are various pictures of Herero people from that time; very traumatic pictures. There's one image where it was of an execution where it was black men hanging in a tree. And I saw it, and it was just so difficult for me to not associate that with lynchings in the South, even though it's obviously a very very different image, and it's sort of like this palimpsest. I feel like American racial dynamics are so drummed into me that I see them in places where they actually aren't, but I also feel like that means that they are kind of everywhere.

What exciting projects are you working on now?

I've been working on all kinds of stuff! Sorry, that sounded really awful. I've been working on two sort of different plays most recently; one that's sort of about photography in Greece, you know, another light comedy, and then the other one that I'm not sure what it is yet, but I've just been basically been watching lots and lots of YouTube videos from like 2007-2008 of beauty bloggers and teenagers doing diaries and just various girls, and so I think I'm trying to write a play about girls and the Internet that I'm excited about.

Let's wrap this up with a really big picture question. What do you think the American theatre needs right now?

I think that people, the American theater, needs to have faith in their audiences. I think that audiences don't need like a five-act structure and plays only about people that look exactly like them. I think that people crave--people go to theater because they want to learn something new, and they want to think, and they want to empathize with something that is inconceivable to them. Or that's why I go, and I feel like that's why a lot of different kinds of people go, and I feel like the American Theatre needs to trust that more.