

# The Emergence of Daniel Beaty

BY ANGELA GARCIA COMBS



The slave ship, *Remembrance*, has emerged from the Hudson River, obscuring the Statue of Liberty, carrying a cursed cargo of shackled slave-bones, haunted by the spirit of Kofi, a 400-year-old African chief. A crazed man leaps into the river and climbs aboard the irrepressible wreckage of history and soon Liberty Island becomes a dream-like reality show of American archetypes. The characters range from the promising young orphan with AIDS to the spiritually wise grandmother, and include a beggar, a transsexual, a well-to-do businessman, spoken word artists, a shameless story-grubbing reporter, gay, straight, a mentally-ill Shakespearean scholar, mobs—all black, black, and more black characters, played by one astonishing writer-performer Daniel Beaty, in his Obie Award-winning play, *Emergency*, now at the Geffen Playhouse.

This is not, however, a Black Play but a new American Classic, exploring universal questions to be tackled in high schools and college theatres around the globe for generations. And instead of one man posing the central question about what keeps us bound to the cycles of destruction in our lives, our country and the world, many actors will clamor to play just one of the 40 characters so richly created by Beaty.

This is classic Greek construction with a modern spoken word chorus, captured in an extraordinary new style of internet-age-enlightened-youth-wireless-paced-magical-realism-political-theatre-extravaganza.

Our hero, Professor Reginald Johnson, is tragically flawed. "He tries to deny the past in an effort to cope and to protect his children," Beaty explains, "and the slave ship comes to remind the father, and the world, that we

Photography:  
John Groo /  
Hartford Stage

cannot deny the pain of the past. We have to find a way to integrate it and tell the story to our children in order to create a better world.”

And so the father, a lover of words, goes mad, consequently derailing his son’s passionate pursuit of the new-old form of poetry that is—spoken word. The generational divide that splits father and son, past and present, enslaved and free, is handled with crisp clarity, melodious resonance and heart-rending trueness that entrances audiences.

The venerable director, Charles Randolph-Wright, speculates on the need to appeal to the younger generation in the “archaic” form of theatre. “Our world is very instant. We live in the VH1, MTV kind of generated sound bites,” he says as he snap, snap, snaps his fingers. “That pace. Internet. It’s instant!”

Yet the immediacy of *Emergency* seems to belie the timelessness of this sidesplitting tour de force tragic comedy of errors, not unlike Moliere. The classically trained Beaty infuses the stage with a kind of presence like an extemporaneously discovered, multi-million-hit, internet happening sent from iPhone to YouTube. Randolph-Wright conjectures, “I think it’s a great view of what theatre will have to do in the future and how it must go to another level to bring in those audiences.”

Not unlike the evocative stories of Holocaust survivors, Beaty explores the question of American slavery with powerful imagery. “How can I be more free?” Beaty asks. “How can we as humanity be more free? And so I came up with the idea of the Statue of Liberty as the greatest symbol of freedom for our country; then, the idea of the slave ship and slavery as a moment of the time in our country when our freedom was most challenged, when people were most bound.

“Literally the image of the slave ship in front of the Statue of Liberty is a metaphor for what stands in front of our freedom, what is floating in front of our freedom and each of the characters in his or her own way is endeavoring to break free,” explains Beaty with a kind of shyness and clarity that is arrestingly refreshing.

Three incredible women and his own remarkable personal drive are the back-story to the young artist’s notable achievements. Beaty’s mother, Shirley Magee, “led by example of her work ethic and always providing no matter what was going on,” he explains quietly. “I grew up around a lot of chaos and violence and dysfunction, particularly with my male role models. It was the example of my mother working, as well as the vision of a Dr. King that gave me the concept that something else would

be possible. So I remember that as a child in the midst of really horrific things happening, constantly saying to myself, ‘There’s got to be something else, there’s got to be something better.’”

Instead of using his personal story in some self-indulgent, fictionalized confessional, Beaty chose to create a larger story on the subject of the sin of slavery, and the subsequent external and internalized social oppression. This is not a night of Jerry Springer. Beaty explains, “I definitely operate from a core concept of purpose. Purpose is the bridge past ego. So, I very consciously don’t look at what I do as just entertainment, though I am very interested in being entertaining.”

The next hard-working woman to help shape Beaty’s future was Mavis Jackson, his third grade teacher. “I told her I wanted to write speeches like Dr. King,” he relates, “and she coached me to write my first speech which was titled ‘I Think the Best, I Expect the Best.’”

“She would call the local service organizations like Optimist, NAACP and Kiwanis and say, ‘I’ve got this third grader who’s written a speech. Can he come to one

of your meetings and share?’ They would invite me to come; that club would be kind of excited and tell the town. By the time I was in fifth and sixth grades I was traveling

the country a couple of weekends out of the year giving motivational speeches.”

After earning his undergraduate degree from Yale, Beaty received his MFA from the American Conservatory Theatre in San Francisco and went straight to New York “with all my hopes and dreams intact.”

A month later, the Twin Towers were obliterated and Beaty began teaching in the kind of challenged communities reminiscent of his childhood. In true Mavis Jackson mode, Beaty wrote a play and used his own money to rent theatres and present his material. “I’d invite my friends and I would perform the show. And they would invite other people and I would reach out to organizations that I had some kind of affiliation with; people I thought might be interested.” And interested they were.

In walks Ruby Dee, invited by another audience member to Beaty’s early production and soon she becomes his third great-lady champion. “She decided to present me for a night in Harlem in a 750-seat theatre,” he remembers. Over 3000 reservations were received, forcing them to turn away people. Oskar Eustis, the Artistic Director of the Public Theatre, was part of the crowded audience. “He offered me a contract on the spot.” The rest is history—being made and revisited. ■

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*Emergency*  
Plays Tues.-  
Thu. 7:30  
Fri 8; Sat 4  
& 8:30; Sun 2 & 7  
Through May 25  
Tickets: \$35-\$79  
Geffen Playhouse  
10886 Le Conte Ave.,  
Westwood  
310.208.5454 or  
geffenplayhouse.com