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## What Shall We Tell Our Young Playwrights Who Are Black? **Carla Stillwell**

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Black theater is my life. I am the managing producer of [MPAACT](#) (Ma'at Production Association of Afrikan Centered Theater), a company that solely produces new work by playwrights of the Afrikan diaspora. I am a playwright that chooses to write about the African American community that nurtured me and that I love dearly. I am a director that chooses to work with playwrights of Afrikan decent. And most importantly, I am an arts educator and I choose to do this work with as many black children as I can get my hands on. I left my very stable corporate life a few years back to do this thing full time—this black theater thing—that I have been doing since I was a child. So I have made black theater my life.

I think it is safe to say that when you spend this much time with anything (in my case black theater), you think a lot about it. When it is good to you, you think about how much you love it. When it is causing you trouble, you think about why you put yourself through the stress. And when it is in trouble, you try to figure out how to save it, fix it, and make it better. You try to find the root of its problem. And once you think you have identified it, you obsess over what you can say or do to make a difference.

So, it was one week before the first day of black history month when one of the young women, who for whatever reason looks to me for advice, asked me to meet her and talk about the Black History month celebration she wanted to do at one of Chicago's oldest African American arts centers.

I promise I'll get to the point of this story, but in much like my mommy and all the old black women that raised me, I have to work my way up to the point.

Anyway, this young woman said that she and three fellow twenty-something Black artists wanted to do this performance piece inspired by the Margaret Burroughs [poem](#) "What Shall I tell My Children Who Are Black." I hadn't read or thought about this poem in years. So I had to go back and give it a read. Ms. Burroughs' poem, is asking the question: How do we (Americans of African slave ancestry) as a people tell our children that they matter—that they exist and are worthy in a world that constantly seeks to degrade and dismiss their existence. This was my Oprah Winfrey "Ah Ha" moment. See, I have been reading plays written by black writers and working with

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these playwrights and let me tell you something—I am concerned. I have been asking myself about the future of black theater because I have been watching the black story die. And it all starts with the story—right?

In an effort to be produced (something the black writer must do to eat), the black playwright has moved into a safe and post racial model of storytelling. The days of an August Wilson—who stressed that the stories of black maleness were important American stories that had to be added to the canon—has passed. The days of a Ntozake Shange—who redefined what a play could look like and gave voice to the black woman character without that voice being filtered through her sage advice to her children or her

importune plea to her man to “see” her—have passed. Season after season most of the plays that cross my desk are about three things; 1) Great Negroes in black history and the triumph over whiteness 2) Stories about the “hood” and the triumph over the ghetto 3) Stories with no cultural specificity about black people floating in a neutral space. This is a problem for the theater company that desires to produce new work from the black writer. I am concerned. But then this poem was returned to my consciousness and I was given the blueprint of what I think needs to be said.

This is what I shall say to you, my young playwrights who are black.

Without you, the black theater is not going to last, because the voice of a generation—your generation—is squarely rooted in the details of your specific story. Don’t allow your voice and unique black experience to be muted by this country’s efforts to move us all past race. Because when you allow your voice to be muted, you participate in the genocide of the black experience and the death of the black story. You, the black playwright are the future of black theater. On your shoulders rests the responsibility to add the rich cultural tapestry that is blackness to the American theater canon.

You must be bold in your storytelling. You must explore the full breath of the humanity of those who are descendants of African slaves. In this boldness is the future of black theater. You must have the audacity to tell the story of blackness the way you truly experience blackness because this is the heart of the black story. And let me free you from this notion—there is no singular black experience. There is no story of blackness that is most salient. Be comfortable in knowing

that whatever story you wish to tell is a black story because you my black playwright told it. Live in your blackness and spread it through your story.

My dear young playwrights, know what type of artist you want to be. Learn your aesthetic and stand by it with courage. To learn your aesthetic, you must first be a student of your culture, and a student of the discipline of writing. It is your job to seek out those who are standing boldly in their art and aesthetic and ask them to stand boldly beside you. Some of them will say no, but many of us will say yes.

I know you are in a world where your scripts are pushed aside more often than not. I know that your impulse is to move closer and closer to a neutral story washed clean of the things that might be off putting to mainstream theater—things like your blackness. This move toward neutrality is very tempting because you have to eat. But if you swallow your voice, the future of black theater is pushed down into the gullet of the institution that is American theater and the black story will soon be digested and then passed.

To my young playwrights who are black, there are places for you to grow. There is a community of artists that will welcome you into their home. I have one such home. But you have to show up. Your generation has a gift—the gift of Google. Search for the black theater companies doing the work that you want to do and reach out to them. If they don't call you back, call them again. Be bold in your pursuit of opportunities to practice your craft.

When the theater world looks at you and asks you why—why your story is special or important (and the theater world will ask) keep in mind that the reason we revere the works of Hansberry, Wilson, Shange, Nottage, Cleage and company is because they made the bold choice to live in their blackness and live in it loudly. These playwrights wrote/write the stories that ring true to their spirits and that sing of the full breath of their humanity, because they embraced that they are human because of their blackness, not in spite of it.

To my young playwrights who are black, I have ultimate faith that you can move forward boldly in your unique brand of black storytelling because this bold storytelling is the breath of life that keeps our beloved black theater healthy so that she will be there for the next generation of storytellers. I have faith in you, because I must. I have faith in you because someone had faith in me. My hand is stretched to you my young playwrights who are black. You are the axis on which the future of the black story spins. Stand boldly in this space with all the honor and joy that lives there.

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