

On the community of theater



Playwright Branden Jacobs-Jenkins on what makes the experience of theater so special, examining classic work as a means of understanding your own creative tools, and understanding what it is you are trying to make people feel.

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As told to Resham Mantri, 2811 words.

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Why do you write plays?

I was an Anthropology major in college, and we read this book, by Emile Durkheim, *The Division of Labor in Society*. His whole argument was that people liked being together. We're social animals, and theater is an excuse to gather with strangers and be peaceful. We sit in darkness and collectively hallucinate a kind of reality. The essence of that is moving to me and feels essential. I'm drawn to it as this dangerous space of collective reckoning, where we have to trust each other to behave—it's where we all decided we're not going to fight; we're going to all be together in the dark, basically.

To me there's literally nothing like a play or a live performance. Music performances are similar, where there's nothing like an amazing concert. And so it has to do with this idea of trying to tame "liveness." It's like pure presence. It's such a crazy steep mountain to dedicate your life to, but basically what I'm here to do is to wrestle with that idea. Being in time and being present. Being in the body and trying to tell a story with that material.

Part of what makes live music so great is that you're in a space with people and at certain points you're all feeling the same thing. Do you strive for that with plays? Do you write plays hoping that people will experience a certain emotion? Is that part of your process?

I can talk very confidently about the work I've done so far, because I feel like I'm currently in a weird transitional phase, and have been for about a year. I'm trying to ask new questions. I was always interested in the idea of what a democratic audience is. The success of melodrama as a form is predicated on the audience all feeling the same thing at the same time. And yet we live in a pluralist democratic society where that's technically impossible. We've all decided that's impossible.

What about the audience is like a microcosm or analog for the social contract? What does it mean to create an audience experience that is not the same all the time? The thing about an audience is that it is just a mob on its ass. If an audience stood up, it would become a mob. So what does it mean to, in that space, go from feeling connected to people around you and then isolated from them? Could that be an experience that is valuable to people?

I think theater is really amazing for creating a sense of wonder and awe, because when it's good, it's like magic. The thing about film or even recording an album, like a Beyoncé album, is what you're looking at or consuming is a product of the very best takes of that attempt. The thing about theater is that so many things have to go right in order for you to have an experience that's meaningful. It feels like the Olympics. It feels like there's a kind of "sporty" element to it. We are drawn to things like sport or even like virtuosic music performance, because it almost feels spiritual in it's working, because we're touching on the very deepest gifts of the human being in time.

One of the things that really frustrates me is the power of marketing right now. How much power we give it—in terms of starting a story. I feel like it's made it impossible to genuinely surprise people. The amount of emails I have to write when I have marketing conversations [about a play], like *Gloria* for example, or even *Appropriate*, I have to be like, "Guys! Why would you spoil this thing!?" You had the experience I wanted you to have, because you knew nothing going in. You had this experience that you're so excited about. Now you want to do a piece about it, but you're spoiling that very thing you [loved]—"I wish people were more committed to that idea of surprise, because it feels like that's what is being lost in this moment of needing to know everything before you go see it."

So there's one notion I'm always trying to chase, and it's that idea of the sublime or awe or wonder or magic... just really being taken by surprise.

Have you felt limited in any way by the form? Are there things that you feel you can't do or can't try to do?

There's always been a part of me that's trying to be epic, drawn to things that are hours and hours and hours long, which is why I think I've been dabbling in television the way that I have. It's something about when your canvas of time is that broad, the kind of emotional journeys you can take people on just increase exponentially. There's also the question, always, of audience. The real joy of *An Octoroon* is that, for whatever reason, people found that play.

I still hear about people who saw it, and that's really moving to me, because the average run off-Broadway of a show is six weeks. When something is good, and people find out during week five, it's too late to buy tickets sometimes. How do I build out the life of a piece? In some ways that's when scripts become important. That's when plays that travel become important in general. More people have read my plays than seen my plays.

You mentioned collaborators. That's a huge part of bringing your plays to life, is seeking out people that you work with. What's important to you in those people you collaborate with?

I think it's different based on whether it's a designer, a director, or a performer. There are a handful of directors I work with who I will work with for the rest of my life. Three or four people. And they're all very different. They all have different powers. Every kind of collaboration always feels slightly like a marriage to me, or like you're dating someone. Not all your exes are the same. They all gave you different things.

When I write a play, I don't attach a director to it immediately, but I think I know pretty soon after I finish it who it's probably for. All my collaborators are super intelligent. They're some of the smartest people I know.

They have to be. I'm a very verbal person. Language is important to me. I think of language as an amazing gift. It's like a holy gift. It ranges from directors like Sarah Benson, who is not very verbal but for some reason has patience and makes space for my verbosity, to someone like Lila Neugebauer, who talks as much as I do. With her, it becomes this way that we arrive at new things. I feel like there's a really huge sensitivity to communication in whatever form it takes for that person.

For me, the primary job of the director is about how things look. And their secondary job is about holding a room and managing a room of a people and all those emotions. So you have to both have a sense of style, I think, but also you have to be a good person. I feel like I've worked with directors who were in it for the power trip, and I really do stay away from folks like that, because I really think we're all trying to achieve something that's borderline sacred and holy and magical. It's just the mood I'm in today, but the theater is ancient. It's thousands of years old. You can't be a dummy with it. It's an old and expensive toy.

In terms of performers, I think I'm sort of known a little bit now for casting my actors through workshops. I bring them in early on, and they're part of the readings and development. I really am obsessed with comedic actors because comedic actors are very egoless in some funny way. They have to be intelligent and also good readers, in order to be able to hear and sense the rhythms. But they also know that to be a good comedic actor, you have to be generous in your scenes. It's about volleying. I just find people with a sense of humor and intelligence are the ones I always want to be around anyway, so why not try to work with them? They always add so much to the experience of building the piece.

In your plays *An Octoroon* and *Everybody* you reference other much older plays. In *Everybody*, you reference *Everyman*, a 15th Century morality play, and in *An Octoroon*, you reference *The*

Octoroon, a play from 1859. What draws you to rework, or say something about, older works?

In both of those plays, I feel I was, in part, trying to make a case for the theater. In *An Octoroon*, I was feeling annoyed by, again, a marketing phenomenon I was seeing where [a play would be marketed as] "about the Black experience." Or where a play is [marketed as] "about race." I don't think plays are about anything. Plays are about the people who show up together. People write plays and say this is a play about the Amazon tribes, and it's performed in the middle of Westchester. You're like, "No! This has nothing to do with those Amazon tribes!"

Theater is not a zoo. Theater is not anthropology in that way. With *An Octoroon*, I wanted to literally talk about American Theater having these roots that are ultimately whitewashed in some way. When we think about American Theatre we get on our computers and think about something beginning with Eugene O'Neill writing in the 20th Century. And, it's like, "No!" He had influences. This country is older than O'Neill. What are we actually hiding about what we do? Why might it be valuable to look at? That was sort of part of what influenced *An Octoroon*. I was trying to make people understand what's at stake when we say that theater is about race or not.

And then, similarly, *Everybody* grew out of conversations that the director Sarah Benson and I were having during *An Octoroon* about questions of moral theater. Does theater have morality? *Everyman* is technically one of the oldest plays in the English language. It's generally taught as the first play in the English language, even though, of course, you do one inch of research and you're like, "No. This is a play that came from the Netherlands and it was also adapted theater..." All these stories they tell, and no one can claim ownership of them. They're just ancient.

This notion of shedding every bad part of yourself to die, that's an old idea. And theater has been trying to hold that for a long time. What happens is these plays wind up in text books, being only taught to Ph.D. students, rather than being thought of as a part of our actual tradition and canons of human beings. We can all share it. *Everyman*, as we know, premiered in Eastern Britain, and was performed by merchant-class monks, or whatever, but no, that was not their play. You're arguing over questions that predate the economics systems there were then, the racial regimes there were then, and that's actually what every human should have access to. That's what the theater is valuable for in some way.

Part of your work seems to be a struggle with the pressure to talk about race and what that means for you. That struggle feels like a universal one for a lot of people, especially Black and brown people in the arts, right now. When you're one of the first out there trying to represent a particularly absent experience, how does that all sit with you?

I would say the only struggle is that I don't know what people are talking about [when they say "race"]. I think the idea of race... that word is such a smoke screen. It's supposed to hold so many experiences, and then the minute you start talking about race, someone from another community wants to pipe up and say you're doing it wrong, because you're not talking about them. So, I'm not actually talking about race. I don't actually know what that means. My impulse is to always be as specific as possible, but then when you get really specific, people get uncomfortable and that's the space I live in. Are we talking about anti-Blackness? This is not to say that no one else's struggles are worth our time. I can talk very vividly about that [anti-Blackness], but then that makes people feel uncomfortable or "white," which is never a fun feeling for them.

I'll feel like, are we talking about the psychological legacies of slavery? Because when you put things that way, you're not talking about people. You're talking about systems. You're talking about participating in a system, and you can't buy into that conversation based on whether or not you're brown or Black or whatever. It's like, "No." If you're American, you're living in a country whose wealth is founded primarily on "unrepaired" labor. And genocide. So that's a construction that affects immigrants, too. So, if you come to this country for opportunity, note that opportunity is based on this thing, so you now participate in this opportunity, too.

Some have described your plays as deconstructive. Some of the techniques that you use in your plays include current hip-hop music in correlation with a re-telling of a play from 1859. In *Everyman*, the actors didn't know what role they were playing until they got on the stage. Do you have these techniques in mind while you're writing? Or are they something you use to get to the story you're trying to tell?

I think a lot about dramatic technique and how many forms of it there are, but part of what drew me to the genre was this notion that a genre is literally like a historically based phenomenon. For whatever reason, the forces of history and audience viewership created this kind of theater. It didn't initially have a name, but had a name eventually. I love the kind of experience of trying to understand why melodrama emerged when it did. So there is a kind of conscious study of technique happening when I'm adapting these plays, certainly.

I want to create a sensation in a person of them being aware of themselves as a thing that is seeing and interpreting. It's really profound. Getting people to a place where they're asking the question of, "Wait. What is this?" is awesome!

That's the experience in life that we would almost call mysticism. And I think that's something I'm always trying to deploy or find. The place of destabilization. Because I think, in some ways, even the meanest audience members or the most critical people, they all come to the theater wanting to be swept up. They'll never admit it, but everyone wants to be moved, ultimately.

You have received both popular and critical praise for your work. When did you know you were doing something right in the world of theater? When did you know you were on to something?

Oh man! I still don't know. I definitely felt things shift for me around *An Octoroon*. And later on with *Gloria*. I think the thing that always throws me is when people younger than me, like students, say something to me [about the importance of my plays to them], because I distinctly remember being a student and what it meant, and that's the feedback I feel most affirmed by and the most freaked out by.

It's so tricky. Every playwright knows that no one is a darling forever. So even with this lovely success I'm having, I know that one day it can totally dry up, and that's the thing you have to live with, and figure how to live with, and try to just stay focused on the work, and doing the work. I also teach now, which is really helpful, in terms of grounding me, keeping me thinking about the future. That's it.

Branden Jacobs-Jenkins recommends:

Everything by [Octavia E. Butler](#)

[Mary J Blige's performance of "No More Drama" at the 2002 Grammys](#)

RuPaul's What's The T podcast with Michelle Visage

Jelani Cobb

[Patti LaBelle singing "Somewhere Over the Rainbow"](#)

[Patti LaBelle singing "This Christmas" at the 1996 National Tree Lighting ceremony](#)

Patti LaBelle's "New Attitude" on loop

[Ottessa Moshfegh's writing](#)

[Tomma Abts's paintings](#)

The relationship between form and content in [Dua Lipa's "New Rules"](#)

Name

Branden Jacobs-Jenkins

Vocation

Playwright



