

## “Bringing the Lost to Light”

Amid a global pandemic and a climate crisis with creatures facing extinction, a systemic racism, centuries in the making, has come to a head with an unmistakable call to action resulting in many significant measures: *The 1619 Project*; the Black Lives Matter Movement; the progressive anti-racist BIPOC document *We See You White American Theater*; and this fall, Samuel L. Jackson and LaTanya Richardson Jackson’s powerful docuseries *Enslaved*, which explores the brutal history of the transatlantic slave trade through the search for ship wreckage on the ocean floor... the graves of those enslaved who never made it to distant shores.

All of these measures, most especially the latter one, triggered a series of memories for me.

While a dramaturg at the Guthrie Theater in the 1980s, I took courses in geology and paleontology in my off hours. I then began writing to the Geological and Mineral Societies of Minnesota to track down quarries and roadside sites where I could dig for invertebrate fossils, mostly for the Middle to Late Ordovician Period (approximately 450 million BCE). On one hillside, I discovered a 100-foot-long, three-inch-wide geological seam of clay and limestone filled with fossils: brachiopods, trilobites, crinoids, and corals. The first time I brushed away the stone and mud to reveal one of these fossils it delivered a rush of joy: I was the first creature to encounter this invertebrate after lightless millions of years. Over the next decade, I found myself traveling around the United States to fossil hunt, either alone or as part of sanctioned expeditions, to discover sites of the five major extinctions in the history of this planet. Those experiences etched vivid memories that would impact my life as a dramaturg in years to come.

During my time as a graduate student at the Yale School of Drama and Assistant Literary Manager at the Yale Rep, I had the privilege of knowing Lloyd Richards, August Wilson’s primary director and meeting this gifted artist. Much later in 2006, shortly after our Shakespeare died, I was serving as Arena Stage’s company dramaturg and searching with artistic director Molly Smith for someone to helm *Gem of the Ocean*, the first part of his epic tetralogy. We were fortunate to engage Paulette Randall, a gifted British theatre director of Jamaican descent who had directed the play in London. After working closely with Paulette for several months to assemble a strong collaborative team and cast, I was asked to join the cohort as the production dramaturg. It is set in turn-of-the-century Pittsburgh and features 285-year-old Aunt Ester and Citizen Barlow, an everyman figure propelled into a spiritual journey on the legendary *Gem of the Ocean*. The slave ship travels to the mythical “City of Bones,” Wilson’s name for the graveyard beneath the transatlantic route. As readers, and audience members, we are transported onto the vessel to bear witness to those who perished in the Middle Passage.

The first day of rehearsal, Paulette asked everyone intimately involved in the production to share personal responses to the play. As we went around the room and raw experiences of many black artists emerged, I felt scared that I would have nothing worthy to offer the community. What experience from my past as a middle-aged white man could I possibly

contribute to this circle that would matter? And then I remembered what I had shared for years as a dramaturgy mentor when asked about the most important thing to bring to the first rehearsal: not the research, not the books, not the images – but your life experience, which can take on many unexpected forms. I began sharing that I had secretly always wanted to be a paleontologist, long before the dinosaur craze triggered by *Jurassic Park* films. I told the story of digging for long-buried fossils on lost weekends in limestone seabeds until I had resurrected them to the light – millions of years later.

They were patient with me.

I read from Clyde W. Ford's preface to *The Hero with an African Face* and his horrific description of the stone prison Elmina Castle on the West Coast of Africa, the inhuman transatlantic voyage, and the unspeakable numbers lost during the Middle Passage when the "human cargo" – millions and millions of insured bodies – were thrown overboard on their way to the New World. I remember quietly saying : "As someone who has uncovered after 450 million years fossils long lost to the light, I can imagine that in 20 million years – when the Atlantic Ridge has been raised by geological forces – a narrow road of bones will rise up, a limestone ridge of shame hundreds of miles long that sentient creatures of this planet, or another, may discover and wonder at. There will be a geological signature we will leave behind – not the Pyramids, not a Great Wall of China, but a lasting 'Oceanic Ridge of Shame.'"

There are many kinds of "Places at the Table or in the Room" that exist – visible or invisible, acknowledged or unacknowledged. Especially for the ever-evolving creature the Dramaturg. Over a decade after working on *Gem of the Ocean*, especially looking back at the past year, long overdue change is in the air. I continue to work on plays, many of them as a "ghost dramaturg." Will I work with a Black playwright or director again in this new era with long-awaited BIPOC demands rightly emerging at last? Who knows? All I know is that, while a story may not be mine, I will work hard to enrich it, to deepen our working environment with my past experiences, aiding my collaborators in their creations wherever and whenever possible.

Mark Bly (he/him), October 2020