

“S.O.F.T.”
Soul Operation for Theatre
A pedagogical theatre approach by Kezia Waters

When we think about death we often think about it in physical terms, there must be blood involved. Particularly when we think about the death of Black and other BIPOC we think about it in its relationship to Gun Violence, The Civil Rights Movement, The Black Lives Matter Movements, Black on Black Crime, The War on Drugs, Slavery and Police Brutality. What about its relationship to Arts and Culture? Tawnya Pettiford-Wates a Black American actress talks about her experience auditioning for, *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/ When the Rainbow is Enuf* by Ntozake Shange, “The exploration and/or discovery of a pluralistic and inclusive methodology. This imposition renders the non-white student/ artist deficient and underserved by the very training that is supposed to equip and prepare them for not only a highly competitive industry ...but, one might argue, more importantly the ability to be fully grounded in the sense of self-identity and self-knowledge.” (*Black Acting Methods*, pg. 107) Even though Wates spend countless hours and years studying the Theatre Canon, most, if not, all were men and all were white, she was not prepared to play herself, a black woman and was lost within a pedagogy that never saw her or valued her individuality in the context of race, ethnicity and gender. I am proposing that theatre pedagogies and practices that are not inclusive of BIPOC identity and knowledge are pedagogies and practices that kill BIPOC bodies & souls (spirit).

By using Black Ritual Theatre pedagogy as a tool when crafting and rehearsing you establish a direct path to lost identity, you address and dismantle white patriarchal rule over Arts Education, and you save a life!

Driven by Emotion: Black Pedagogy/ Drama is often times not driven by a particular plot, although not necessarily absent of plot. European structure values time and event in order to

achieve a climax. Behavior in European structure is concerned and connected to the reality established while Black Pedagogy/ drama is concerned with a form and driven by emotion. Carlton Molette states in his writing about ritual drama and black theatre, “Euro-American assumption that all behavior is either rationally motivated (resulting in good behavior) or emotionally motivated (resulting in base behavior). The Afro- American aesthetic places a very high value upon emotionally motivated or spiritually motivated behavior.” (“Ritual Drama in The Contemporary Black Theatre” pg. 26) By the very description of emotion as “base” you can see where a BIPOC student/ actor is forced to stop/kill their emotional impulses. In black culture emotions are so closely related to Spirit which is why often times the word *Soul* is used to describe the black aesthetic. That being said you can see where one can sell their soul for the approval or to “fit into” Euro-American Theatre / Drama Programs.

How is this black aesthetic more inclusive and therefore can hold space for BIPOC students? The soul and emotion is not concerned with the rational ideals of intellect which encompasses race and ethnicity but is rather driven by an individual’s emotional releases and impulses. So, it transcends race which is why often times Black Art is spiritual in nature.

Kinetically Unbound: When we think about the images created or associated with freedom we often think about motion in space- birds flying, horses running, flags waving. we think about things in relationship to air or the unseen, Soul/ Spirit. The Black aesthetic/ritual is often concern with this particular form and therefore it is necessary that pedagogy supports actors looking to train in said aesthetic. The movement practices we (institutionalized training actors) learn are particular and rational according to behavior. Movement from the center and torso are often imperative to achieving in Euro-American theatre pedagogy. Afro-American Ritual Drama is the use of the extremities as compared to the use of the torso. The ideal of grace

in European dance movement generally places a very high aesthetic value upon certain specific kinds of movement of arms and legs: five specific movements and, no more, are permitted.” (“Ritual Drama in The Contemporary Black Theatre”, pg. 27) The biggest difference between the trainings is the fact that black movement is not specific for the sake of being rational but expressive of emotion. The walls that BIPOC bodies build to maneuver throughout the world are very much different than white individuals. They are constantly asked to drop those layers and be vulnerable during training by individuals who do not understand the complexities of their identity. These extremities will put the actor in a vulnerable state necessary for training without having to mentality pry open their heart, which is unethical. The extremities are big enough to hold any expression. Most BIPOC playwrights write specifically about freedom so training should be able to catch the essence of motion in space, if not you are demobilizing a BIPOC actor and therefore killing his Soul.

Character work through Repetition: The use of repetition is often associated with memory because in Euro-American styles of theatre it is purely done verbally but within Black Pedagogy/drama it is done with a whole embodiment of the work, a physicality that when repeated impulsively allows the actor to enter a semiconscious state often associated with spirit possession (what the Western world knows as “Trance”). You see this style of transcendence from repetition in a lot of other black art forms, music (Hymns/Negro Spirituals, dance (Alvin Ailey), and visual art (Carrie Mae Weems). The idea that repetition to spirit possession can change your physical characteristics and the way you move throughout the imaginary word is cited by Dr. Katrina Hazzard-Donald, “During the journey through possession, the devotee loses full consciousness and slips into a semiconscious state in which the physical appearance is transformed, the individual becomes the temporary vessel for spiritual entity, sometimes the possessed both

experiences and demonstrates fantastic effects of personality, physical strength, endurance and pain tolerance.” Now, obviously in an educational setting we are not imposing religious or spiritual beliefs but I propose the practice as a cultural one verses a spiritual one similar to that of Yoga and Suzuki. Euro-American Theatre founding fathers have often been fascinated with Asian cultural and spiritual art forms but have rejected the essence of blackness. By not having access to this style of training you are killing the expression of the BIPOC actor/theatre practitioner.

Individuality valued: “As with a soloist in a jazz quartet, quintet, or band, individuality is promoted in the order to sustain and increase the creative tension with the group- a tension that yields higher levels of performance to achieve the aim of the collective project.” (“SoulWork”, pg. 2) one of the biggest things that I am seeing amongst Euro-American approach to ensemble work is this idea of erasing one’s identity and assuming a position of neutrality. This position of neutrality is also at the core of colorblind casting. Black Ritual understands the role of the individual even within a group. Title is given based on individual’s talents but talents are not hierarchal. Simple acknowledgement of race, ethnicity, and gender starts the process of creating an intentional rehearsal space that is not only about putting up a play or training but rather opening dialogue about identity and the politics that comes with said identity. Without acknowledgement of an individual in their wholeness you erase their presence and the significance of the space they hold and therefore kill them.

One aspect of training within a Euro-American institution is this idea of having to be performance ready when you’re on stage. This idea is actually not useful for an actor but more importantly a training actor because it creates a space unsafe for making mistakes. Most black ritual drama/ pedagogy recognizes the stage as more of a communal space or sanctuary. Within

this space, you are allowed and encouraged to try new things and within this space is grace to evolve. This is not only a more ethical way to develop as an artist but it births innovative ideas. Tawnya Pettiford-Wates talks this idea of “Sankofa” within ritual drama stating, “A primary and guiding principle in our creative process is the west African word Sankofa. Literally it means to go back and fetch it. Concisely, if a man goes on a journey and he gets down the road only to discover he has forgotten something- Sankofa, go back and fetch it. There is no shame and forgetting” This idea of Sankofa within training is important because it extends past the rehearsal space and the immediacy of the text and movement itself but also going back and fetching what you lost within a cultural reference. If you do not know the roots of your family and how your race or ethnic group contributed to art it is easy to feel the need to assimilate and kill your soul/ spirit but Sankofa provides a way to go fetch it.

Not the Only One: While researching practitioners and theatre artist whose method grounded itself in black ritual/ drama I found out that multiple pioneers have been trying to push this to the front burner of art’s education. It is imperative that we acknowledge those people who saw a deficit and created a lens of practice to fit it those being Cristal Chanelle Truscott with Soulwork in Houston, Rhodessa Jones who works primary with incarcerated women, Tawnya Pettiford-Wates in Richmond, VA who’s program is incorporated with the theatre program at VCU, Daniel Banks who started Hip Hop theatre initiative, and Ntozake Shange who might be the most well-known person to establish a black pedagogy she coined the term “Choreopoems” for her particular ritualized way of writing, performing and rehearsing.

As you can see, there are multiple ways we kill black and brown bodies daily by killing their soul/ spirit, but by using black pedagogy through ritual drama and training you dismantle Euro-American control of art education here in America, you provide a means for self-

knowledge, you bring to light a whole culture that has been intentionally erased, you dig much deeper than Greeks contribution to theatre to find the African roots of civilization, you make an intentional step toward creating a brave space for all actors not just BIPOC but all to feel welcomed to contribute to the process, you empower the individual within any ensemble, you relieve the pressure of feeling like you need to perform and leave a sense of self at the door, you allow a space for emotional release and balance between intellect, you encourage artist to work outside of the Euro-American story structure, you provide representation for actors of color, you amplify voices of the marginalized, you address marginalization within education itself, you give spiritual awakening to BIPOC, and you save a life. Tawnya Pettiford-Wates highlights these things more clearly saying “Training that is devoid of any recognition of cultural identity and cultural location is risking creating artist who are technically proficient but morally and socially dysfunctional or disconnected from the authentic self and their community. We must ask, “Who are we as artists and what is our purpose?”” (*Black Acting Methods*, pp 121)