

PREJUDICE IN *VENUS* TRACES THE ROOTS OF BLACK FEMALE ICONOGRAPHY

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Abstract

This paper will aim to verify how a ‘freak’ show performer named The Venus Hottentot of the early 1800’s in England and in France, came to symbolize the sexualized view of the black female icon today. My thesis production of Suzan-Lori Parks’ play *Venus* will demonstrate how Eurocentric prejudice in the colonial era shaped the historical facts that permeated around this South African woman’s life and death. In keeping with the play’s revised Afrocentric perspective on these alleged facts, ideas about directorial concepts for this show will validate how this play is relevant to contemporary artists and audiences through Parks’ elegant storytelling. This potential narrative of victimization, that could easily come off as maudlin, will be proven to require a sardonic political edge in order to succeed. The director’s challenges and premise, the writer’s background, the play’s roots in truth and fiction, along with production hurdles to overcome will all be discussed.

Dedication

For Lila, Dorian and Anaïs.

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Chapter 1. Introduction

My premise for the production of *Venus* is:

Prejudicial Eyes Lead To Perverted Histories

The question I will be addressing in this thesis paper is:

How does the play *Venus* provoke us to ponder the roots of black female iconography, from historical freaks to contemporary sexualized objects, for better or for worse?

Venus is inspired by one of Britain's most notorious 19th-century racial symbols: an abducted South African Negress grotesquely put on public display and called the Venus Hottentot. Based on true events, *Venus* assimilates irony and empathy, exhibiting the 'abnormally' large buttocks of The Venus (a.k.a. Saartjie¹Baartman) as a sideshow freak. She was displayed to paying crowds in London and Paris from 1810 until her death in 1815. It is no accident that I have chosen to produce this play on the 200th year anniversary of her death. The Venus' "striking features were compared to the European norm, and gave rise to theories that her people [the Hottentots] had peculiar ideas of feminine beauty and were closer on the 'great chain of being' to apes than human beings" (Boonzaier 98). Her real notoriety came post-mortem when her dissected skull, pickled bones and genitals, along with a plaster cast of her body, were put on display at the *Musée de L'Homme* in Paris until they were finally removed out of sight in 1974 (Davie).

In *Venus*, Parks resurrects the spirit of The Venus and appropriates the derogatory notion of the Hottentots through an Afrocentric lens; much the way African-Americans have reclaimed the inflammatory term 'nigger' today (Kennedy 174). I will demonstrate how the symbolic

physical exploitation of Parks' *Venus* spans two centuries, giving black women a palpable position in contemporary society amidst revolving prejudicial challenges along the way. My objectives for the final production will be to showcase a wealth of insights about discrimination, mixed with personal experiences surrounding my own multiracial identity. My recent trips to London and Paris will be used to clarify communication about design, and my research material used to stimulate the bigger picture. In the end, the audience will not only be spectators, but mentally active participants in this orbit around the life of *The Venus*.

By exploring prejudices with the psychological belief that all humans harbor them (Parens 219), and applying that to the exploitation of South Africans throughout their colonization period, this thesis will aim to elucidate how one marginalized individual in history sparked a global obsession with the black female mind and body for over 200 years. I will draw upon examples of how Parks threads the lineage of black female ideology throughout time and distance in *Venus*, asking her audience to formulate their own judgments about black culture today.

Chapter three will trace the historical background of Parks and then move to understanding how *The Venus* may be redefined as a symbol of progression, rather than an icon of degraded black womanhood (Catanese 120). Chapter four will demonstrate how the concept of prejudice is explored in the world of *Venus* throughout nuances within the text. Chapter five will illuminate the multi-faceted ways in which the facts and fictions of *Venus* affect design for production in relation to the world then and now. Chapter six will clarify my own vision for the play both as an artist and as it relates to my personal experiences as a mixed race Caribbean Canadian citizen. In pondering the roots of black female iconography as it relates to the prejudicial history of *The Venus*, this paper will ultimately serve as an invaluable guide toward a

successful production of *Venus* in March of 2015.

Chapter 2. Director's Challenge

At present I have two artistic challenges to address with *Venus*:

1) My productions can become overly sentimental and complicated in an attempt to manipulate an audience with fabricated emotions and indulgent design. With the play *Venus*, Suzan-Lori Parks writes characters with truth and heart that can mistakenly be played as saccharine and trite. She paints a picture that travels through both time and space, and that can confuse and alienate an audience if not directed incisively. The challenge will be to illuminate that painting, never allowing the canvas to stray from the story at hand.

One of Parks' harshest critics, author Jean Young of the *African-American Review* classified *Venus* as "a fictitious melodrama" (699). I strongly disagree with this point of view and will strive to defend my production as a relevant political satire dealing with issues of prejudice far removed from the melodramatic form. This will require in-depth conversations with actors early in the process, steering them away from over emotional habits and leading them toward Parks' overt style of mordant humour. Initial discussions with designers will be integral in streamlining the backdrop of the piece, ensuring all thirty-one scenes of the play have cohesive meaning and purpose in concert with the gestalt of the script's form and content. From the onset, my focus will be to enrich the artistic team with as much passion as I have garnered in researching this play by sharing all relevant information. To elevate my understanding and awareness, my summer semester research included trips to London and Paris, visiting specific locations highlighted in the script to gain first hand knowledge of both cities' historic architectural designs.

As a director I often saturate artists with too much personal enthusiasm, leaving little

room for actors and designers to grow on their own during the rehearsal process. To counteract this I will need to guide their journeys rather than force discoveries upon them, ensuring a holistic and inclusive environment for the production overall. This is the largest cast, with 23 actors, and the biggest stage I have ever directed for. My wealth of information about *Venus* will need to be bottomless yet concise, and my personal investment will have to give way to trusting the ensemble nature of this work.

2) I have a habit of starting the rehearsal process with a strong premise that, near the opening of the show, I begin to lose sight of. This tendency to stray from my original vision can leave artists feeling lost when my assurance is needed the most. With *Venus*, I will need to have a clear vision about my ideas of time, place and setting, staying strictly true to Park's intent whose, "angle is this: *History, Memory, Dis-Memory, Remembering, Dismembering, Love, Distance, Time, a Show*" (*Venus* 166). My conviction that Parks has written a well-made play, in conjunction with a premise that I can confidently refer back to, will be the anchors that hold everyone together so that the run of the show has solid ground. By maintaining this directive, I will be capable of fielding any questions of artists from pre-production to opening night, using specific references from the script or relevant information from my research. It will be essential to constantly refer back to my original premise so that ultimately an audience too will feel the cohesive drive of the company's intent. It will be a delicate balance knowing when I can give over my vision to others wholly without abandoning the ship too soon, so that artist and spectator will co-exist fluidly in the magical realm of theatre.

Chapter 3. Suzan-Lori Parks' Historiography

From very early on in her education as a creative writer, Parks never imagined she would be a playwright. In an interview in 2012 she said, “Theatre to me was hanging out with people who did theatre. To me, they were people who wore funny hats and spoke, ‘Dahling, dahling.’ They were all from, like, Long Island or something” (Tichler 209). So how did this early bias of the theatre lead to her formidable playwriting style as a social critic against the Eurocentric view of the African-American Diaspora?

Born in Fort Knox, Kentucky on May 10, 1963, Parks moved around a lot growing up due to her father's military service, eventually landing in West Germany where she attended high school. She later studied acting for a year at the London Drama Studio and then went to Mount Holyoke College in Massachusetts (Larson 1). It was here that she took a short-story writing class with acclaimed African-American novelist James Baldwin whom she described as if being “in the presence of the sun, you know the SUN” (Tichler 210). He told Parks to try playwriting because of her dramatic flair when reading out her stories, and the rest is history. Parks, following his advice, quickly garnered numerous awards and accolades for her playwriting. A black female icon in her own right, she currently lives in New York City, and had a new play, *Father comes Home from the Wars, Parts 1, 2 & 3*, open in the fall of 2014 at the Public Theatre (Parks, “Suzan-Lori Parks”), which I had the fortune of seeing to further my research.

A driving force behind her style of writing comes from a concept she refers to as “Rep & Rev” - repetition and revision – which is a means of accessing the musicality of oral African traditions (Greene 148). This technique purposefully repeats and revises historical moments in time and text to mold a theatrical form, as is employed on numerous occasions in *Venus*. For example, three distinct chorus groups are utilized to announce certain events, Parks modifies the

listener's perception when the text is repeated slightly different each time:

The Chorus of the 8 Human Wonders

I've been in this line of work for years
and yet everytime the crowds gather and the lights flash up
I freak out.

My first 5 months in this racket were like hell.
I didnt sleep I didnt eat my teeth were chattering nonstop.
That girl they call The Venus H. is holding up
holding up pretty well I think. And her crowds have been
stupendous.

(Some audience is better than none at all and since shes come
we're in another economic bracket.) Stupendous!
Stupendous! Still: (42)

Much later in the play, the same chorus revises the text as such:

The Chorus of the 8 Human Wonders

I've been in this line of work for years and years
And every time the crowds gather
And the lights flash on me
I freak out.

That girl they call The Venus, The Venus Hottentot, shes
Holding up, well,
Pretty well: Stupendous, Stupendous. Still: (85)

In the above passages, the cynical Wonders who perform in the freak show alongside The Venus, eventually gain empathy toward her plight. The original exclamations on "Stupendous!" refer to the excessive fat developed on the buttocks of The Venus known anatomically as "steatopygia" (Parks, *Venus* 164). In the second version, the shock of this exaggerated

phenomenon has worn off. These variations in repeated text are clues into Parks' work wherein she subtly dissects the Eurocentric narrative of *The Venus* and reassembles it to meet her Afrocentric female standpoint. Parks' use of the Rev & Rep technique has an audience consume text voyeuristically at first, and then reintroduces it much later in the play, refocusing up to contemporary standards of acceptability; in this case, the black woman's enlarged buttocks as normative and beautiful. We see this in society today where it is sexually normalized to advertise large buttocks jeans specifically designed for black women (Crais 147).

Analyzing Parks' writing style, one can handily infer that her interest in examining the life of *The Venus* comes from her need to demystify the predominately Eurocentric history of this enigma: "I knew this Saartjie Baartman woman was going to end up in a play of mine. She was a woman with a remarkable bottom, a woman with a past, and that got me interested in her" (Parks, *Venus* 166). *Venus* begins at the end, counting down in sequence from scene thirty-one to one, as narrated by The Negro Resurrectionist, a vagrant wanderer who used to dig up graves illegally for a living. This "digger" (his title purposefully rhyming with a racial slur) guides the audience from *The Venus*' South African hometown in 1810 to her European lodgings in London and then Paris, highlighting the prejudicial tones against black women every step of the way. The *Venus* paired with the Negro Resurrectionist causes the audience to re-evaluate their traditional ideas about slavery from European perspectives, and acknowledge how entrenched North American roots are buried in African memory. According to Lisa Anderson's book, *Black Feminism in Contemporary Drama*, the historical Venus Hottentot confirmed black women's sexuality in Europe that was already exploited in colonial Africa and the Americas (58). For example, in the play, when asked by The Chorus of the Court in London if she had, "ever been indecent?" The *Venus* replies, "Never. No. I am just me... To hide yr shame is evil. I show mine"

(83). Here, Parks begins the painful process of agency for *The Venus* promoting Africans as humans with choice, instead of freaks of amusement. Parks is asserting her own legacy as a woman of colour in America, fully capable of writing a non-commercial play that can still succeed as artistically legitimate, winning the coveted Obie award in 1996 for *Venus* (Parks, “Suzan-Lori Parks”).

Parks’ real life dealings with prejudice as an African-American female writer in New York mirrors *The Venus*, as succinctly stated in Jennifer Larson’s book, *Understanding Suzan-Lori Parks*:

... the playwright needs, perhaps even craves, an audience. But as with *The Venus*, questions arise about the lengths to which a black playwright must go to attract this audience, to fill the theatre seats with paying customers. Ultimately the black playwright must sell black life, black history, and the black experience to a predominantly white audience, and so, like *The Venus*, the playwright straddles the line between complicity and agency. (32)

To date, Parks’ successful career may be in part due to her choice to remain in her native land, igniting the political fire that sculpts a play such as *Venus*. The prejudicial barrier that divides America between white and black citizens is a constant theme that demands an insider’s perspective. This coupled with her education abroad, benefits *Venus* in provoking a North American audience to dig into their discriminatory colonial past across vast distances and times.

Chapter 4. The Roots of Prejudice in *Venus*

In the groundbreaking book *The Nature of Prejudice* by psychologist Gordon W. Allport prejudice is defined as, “A feeling, favorable or unfavorable, toward a person or thing, prior to, or not based on, actual experience” (6). The nature of prejudice itself implies two distinct groups, namely an ingroup and an outgroup (Aviram 2). As humans developing in the early phase of infancy, we depend upon safety from a caregiver to be our ingroup. In adult life this ingrouping expands to include larger interactions of race, culture, religion or nationality, and again forms a safe bond from any foreign outgroups (Aviram 3). In *Venus*, Parks asks her audience to revise their prejudgment about African-American women as an alien outgroup, turning them into an innocuous ingroup.

The Venus is introduced early on in Parks’ stage directions as, “The Girl on hands and knees with scrub brush and bucket scrub[ing] a vast tile floor. She is meticulous and vigorous” (18). From the prejudicial standpoint of a North-American audience, The Girl is seen here as the iconic black maid working for her white master. When two characters known as The Brother and The Man enter, we discover that The Girl is a servant on The Man’s South African property. Two things jump out as assumptions in this scenario: 1) The Man and The Brother are in fact brothers, and 2) The Man and The Brother are white males who have ownership over the enslaved Girl. However, looking closer into Parks’ writing, The Brother says to The Man, “Just like a brother!” to which The Man replies, “I am yr brother.” Both then respond with, “Heh heh. Heh heh” (21). This laughter mockingly questions the prejudged fact that they are stereotypical white brothers, allowing for creative casting in these roles.

In the original production casting, The Man was played by a light-skinned black actor (Kalb). In dissecting the history told about South African colonization, there is evidence that

certain black natives to the Cape were of higher status than some Dutch or British invaders (Boonzaier 90). Also, mixed-race sexual relations were rampant at the time (Boonzaier 94), thus many skin colour combinations were conceivable when this story is told. We cannot legitimately assume the European sense that the colonizers were all pure white-bred and that the blacks were all tribal. An Afrocentric view mixed with Parks' creative license to revise history permits an audience to educate themselves about their previous suppositions.

While completing the writing of *Venus*, Parks was simultaneously penning her first screenplay entitled *Girl 6*, giving a contemporary look into American principles. The movie, released in 1996 when *Venus* was also first produced, was directed by renowned African-American film director Spike Lee and continues the exploration of black female iconography. This time, it is in the form of a modern-day aspiring film actress who does phone-sex for money. In *Venus*, the initial image is of "The Venus facing stage right. She revolves, counterclockwise. 270 degrees. She faces upstage" (1). Similarly, in *Girl 6*, the depiction of the actress known only as Girl #6, does a screen test for film director Quentin Tarantino who asks her to bare her breasts and turn clockwise, in a similar fashion to The Venus. Both expose the perversion of black women on display, Parks inviting the audience to rally behind her protagonists by transforming their humiliation from repressed, to "productive abject" (Henderson 135) by the end of each story.

In *Girl 6*, men are frequently seen masturbating privately to the sultry voices of their imaginary white women desires whereas in *Venus*, The Chorus of the 8 Anatomists masturbate as a group while sketching the nearly naked Venus for study. The private act of masculinity where women gain the economic upper hand, in contrast with the pathological fascination of male greed in a hyper sexual group dynamic (Larson 38), highlights Parks' motivation to isolate

how black women have altered their objectified bodies over time, for better or for worse. By releasing both scripts simultaneously, yet displaying male chauvinism toward black women in both eras, Parks verifies how *Venus* resonates as a historical and modern day parable.

In 1807, slavery had been abolished in Britain (Reddie 200), black women theoretically given human status by the time the play begins in 1810. The term ‘Habeas Corpus’, meaning, “Literally: ‘You should have the body’ for submitting. Any of several common-law writs issued to bring the body before the court or the judge” (Parks, *Venus* 65), is used when The Venus is brought to Court for indecency. The Chorus of the Court serves here as objective spectator, demanding to see The Venus in the flesh. On the stand, The Venus pleads her case stating, “I came here black. Give me the chance to leave here white” (76). This purposefully echoes 1950’s black Hollywood movie star Dorothy Dandridge’s famous statement, “If I were white...I would capture the World” (Petersen). Parks utilizes The Venus’ body to begin the painful process of gentrifying blacks into white communities. In the end, the Chorus of the Court decides not to rule, taking credit for merely acknowledging a subhuman Hottentot in court. The Venus is seen here as the first in a long generational line of black women attempting to escape the European precept as public property without individual identity.

The body is also used as an object of symbolism through the character of The Baron Docteur, The Venus’ final owner and then lover in Paris. The Baron’s frustrated obsession with her specific measurements before and after death represents Parks’ view of history’s failure to obtain a truthful past, as history is always in the here and now (Canning 287). The Baron is based on the real life anatomist George Cuvier whose autopsy report of The Venus quantified her inferior difference to white women (Cantanese 125). In the play during the intermission, The Baron delivers a lengthy speech as if “an Anatomical Columbus” (131), detailing inch-by-inch

The Venus' body before an imaginary scientific audience. This section is later repeated and revised when The Baron is under pressure to conform to societal demands and is instructed to no longer fraternize with The Venus. In the final repetition of this passage, the stage directions revise The Baron's cadence by continuing the dissecting speech, "with great difficulty" (148). This difficulty is a historical metaphor for Cuvier's scientific prejudgment of The Venus' dehumanizing status post-abolition, exposing his autopsy's egregious errors over time. As with Cuvier, The Baron eventually exposes himself as a fraud seeking fame in the name of science, wherein Parks allows us to see the consequences of prejudice through his repetitive penance.

Only through time does the wound heal, affording black female icons to write their own history, still in question to this day. Do celebrities like Dorothy Dandridge, Tina Turner or Oscar® winner Halle Berry prove that The Venus' fame has gone from humiliation to celebration, or are they just isolated samples in the larger pot of African-American women under the veil of dignity? The roots in this play wind surreptitiously along prickly thorns of history's truths and lies.

Chapter 5. Truth and Fiction: Designing *Venus*

The mix of fact and fiction permeates *Venus* through the voice of The Negro Resurrectionist, his narration of each scene typically starting as a title from fact. These facts are then played out fictionally with many ironic liberties taken to maintain Parks' drive to sustain the Afrocentric retelling of her American roots. There is nothing more telling, however, than seeing the truth before your very own eyes, and thus my travels to London and Paris for the first time have been a remarkable inspiration in tackling this play's issues. Conveying my candid feelings to the artistic team about time and place in *Venus* as I have experienced it has required strict adherence to my premise in order to rationalize the ultimate design of the production. In doing so, the question of black iconographic roots will reverberate seamlessly throughout the show.

In the play, The Venus in London's overarching Westminster Hall courts exclaims that she wants to fit in with society by "being white", this after the mistreatment her body takes at the hands of the Chorus of the Spectators and by her abusive handler The Mother Showman. Spectators grope and grab at her fetishized buttocks for an extra shilling (45). The Mother Showman kicks The Venus hard during the freak show to sensationalize her as a disobedient animal (45). These physically violent acts reflect the gritty streets of 1810 London where courtesans and freaks historically lined the many open market areas (Linnane 203), an intolerant picture that will be a key design element in keeping with the truth of the era. Hints of the past remain today while walking through the Soho district, the odd peep show available for viewing disrobed women through a glass window at only two Pounds. On the tiny York Street where the real Venus Hottentot was said to have lived (Holmes 6), a gentleman's club with exotic women dancers exists today where for a little extra, a grope is still acceptable. Piccadilly Circus where The Venus was likely displayed², ironically exists today as a tourist explosion with *Ripley's*

Believe it or Not Museum full of waxed freak exhibits.

The architecture of Napoleon's romantic France has the feel of triumph and progress, despite any bias one might have against Bonaparte's past ambitions. The Napoleonic triumphal arches of Paris tower over sightseers where once there was war. The exact location where The Venus lived in Paris³ is similar to the bustling neighborhood she inhabited in London, though her performance space is in a less active part of town. Designing the truth as it is now versus what it was then has been integral in finding the thread with which The Venus transcends time.

Also in Paris, the walls of *College de France* still ring of anatomical science and dissection. Not far from the Seine River, this building transposes the past into today, a secret laboratory where only the privileged may enter. In the play, The Baron's insistent need to conceal his desire to macerate The Venus' remains after death is held in stark contrast to the city's architecture of overt romanticism. The Baron's longing for The Venus may be for fame alone as he explains to her:

You were a sensation! I wouldn't mind a bit of that.

Known. Like you!

Only, of course, in my specific circle. (104)

As with Napoleon's emblematic statues seen throughout Paris, the historical anatomist Cuvier eventually claims his fame with a Venus statue displayed at the *Musée de L'Homme*. This body cast remained there until 1974 when it was finally stored out of public sight. Her pickled remains did not return to South Africa until a large political move by South African President Nelson Mandela had them brought home for burial in 2002 (Holmes 106). This symbolic move is representative of the past's acknowledgement of the abused African woman's plight. The Baron analogously struggles with his era's bigotry against blacks; his true feelings for The Venus never

fully allowed to develop throughout the course of the play.

In a subplot within the play, a West End Theatre show called, “For the Love of Venus” has The Young Man encouraged by The Father and The Uncle to sample sexuality with a Venus Hottentot before marrying The Bride-to-Be:

The Young Man

“Before I wed, Uncle, I’d like you to procure for me an oddity.

I wanna love

Something Wild...

something called “The Hottentot Venus”

Uncle. Get her for me somehow.

The Father and The Uncle

Heh. Heh.

Heh. Heh. (48-9)

In this scene, Parks complicitly chuckles with the audience, showing how the archaic custom of black woman curiosity and dehumanization still exists everywhere, no matter how much society tries to mask it. The numerous images of The Venus seen in her day were usually sexual cartoons, exhibiting her as an outgroup and laughable, opposed to the arousing white models in the increasingly popular pornographic medium⁴. On the Internet, most pornographic websites echo this stereotyping trend with black women often demeaned in ghetto representations of their culture, whereas in contrast white women’s sexuality is portrayed normative (Love). In designing costumes, the contrast in depicting races will need to be addressed; The Venus never fully allowed human rights as an outgroup, alongside the privileged white ingroup.

These images have passed down through generations, the overt sexual discrimination

tucked away in the name of celebrity status. African-American performer Josephine Baker took Paris by storm performing her nude revues to sold-out crowds in the early 1920's (Willis 203-4). However, her famous iconic image in a topless banana dress exemplifies the continual fixation with seeing black women as nearly naked ape-like figures from African jungles. In contemporary North American culture, entertainment icons such as the light-skinned pop star Rihanna continue to bring us back to this image of black females as animals. In her music video for *Rockstar 101*, Rihanna poses as if chained with black paint applied to her nude body (Rihanna). This mirrors The Venus' caged state when touring with The Chorus of the 8 Human Wonders, and echoes the long line of minstrel shows where black performers apply demeaning blackface (Uwimana).

I recall being invited to a bachelor party at a strip club where the only two black exotic dancers self-identified as separate outgroups from the others. They were clearly the most popular women of the evening in the predominantly white male crowd, they themselves exploiting their race as a means to drum up more business. Where black females on stage and in print were once seen as curious sexual objects, they continue to be put on public display as either exotic celebrity oddities in paparazzi frenzy, or as beguiling derogatory Hottentots in highly sexualized situations.

Nowadays the freak is the spectator as we often shake our heads in contempt judging other people's private viewing habits. The question remains however: will black women ever be seen as anything more than a Hottentot in chains, no matter the level of stardom? When white Eurocentric women appropriate black fads, is not that a form of prejudice, whether good or bad? Victorian era women appropriated the fascination of the Hottentot steatopygia, their bustled dresses accentuating the rear. Contemporary misappropriation exists with white pop stars like Miley Cryus taking ownership of the stereotypical African-American dance called "twerking",

where the buttocks shake rapidly in a sexually provocative manner. In *Venus*, Parks often has her protagonist move as “The African Dancing Princess”, a fitting homage to the origins of the twerk. Recently, reality TV star Kim Kardashian was put on public display for Paper Magazine’s Winter 2014 cover. Her buttocks juts out with a champagne glass perfectly placed atop the protruding backside, the photographer Jean-Paul Goude well known for his depictions of black women in degrading portraits (Telusma). While Kardashian is not black, her rapper husband Kanye West and their child are, her questionable celebrity status resonating deeply with the kind of recognition The Venus Hottentot would have garnered comparatively in her day.

Black men also revert to objectifying these stereotypes in popular rap songs entitled, “Wiggle (Big Fat Butt)”, “I Like Big Butts”, or “Baby Got Back”, all with music videos exploiting the lyrics visually. In the play, The Negro Resurrectionist, The Venus’ one true ally, ends up betraying her, as arguably do the many misogynistic black male rappers to their female counterparts.

The original production of *Venus* at New York City’s Public Theatre in 1996 presented multiple challenges for director Richard Foreman that play into Parks’ text of truth and fiction wonderfully. Foreman said of the piece, “I thought that the texture, which is basically what I respond to first in all writing, seemed provocative and difficult and interesting” (Kalb). The texture is written directly into the script as words literally have shape and form, demanding courage and instinct from the director. If a production of the play is any bit afraid to attack the issues of prejudice, then it is open to misinterpretation. In Jean Young’s criticism of this original production, she could not alleviate her own bias of historical truth versus fiction: “Parks’ stage representation in *Venus* creates the illusion that Baartman was a free and liberated woman who enjoyed her status as a sex object and/or was in complete denial of such status altogether. But

historical accounts contradict this representation” (703). This contradiction might have been avoided if Foreman followed through with Parks’ vision to the fullest as he himself admits, “If I had to do it again today I would try to have the courage to make it stranger than it was” (Kalb). At the same time, Young was well aware of the true intent Parks was aiming for: “The treatment of black women's bodies in nineteenth-century Europe and the United States is considered the foundation upon which black women's commodification and objectification is based, and the racist iconography of the sexuality of black women's bodies emerged from these contexts” (706). In staying true to my premise, these contexts will undoubtedly resonate.

A 2004 production of *Venus* at Hunter College did accept the many challenges head on as Director Bill Walters recalls,

One of the difficult things in *Venus* in particular is the way she has twisted it around and looped it back on itself. I think that can frustrate or infuriate some viewers because ... it doesn't come out as a victim play ... in looking at *Venus* and starting to work on it I really felt more than ever that my job as a director was to simply get out of the way and help the thing stand on its own legs ... Saying that I tried to simplify it is not to say there wasn't a lot of work to be done. I think it's actually a pretty difficult text to approach. Luckily, I felt a connection to it, and the main job was working with the design team to come up with a physical space in which this could live and its themes could resonate and its structure could take shape physically.” (Kalb)

Here, Walters adheres to Parks’ demands for accurate design and precise text work. With my in-depth knowledge of the script using director Katie Mitchell’s template of extensive analysis⁵, and

my personal connection to design locations, I will work to achieve what Parks desires from a director of this play: “some kind of understanding of the world of the play and the world in general ... but not an understanding that would obscure the world of the play” (Tichler 217).

Chapter 6. Production challenges and concept

Throughout the play themes of prejudice, love, history and free will are examined in larger-than-life extravagance as *The Venus* encounters sexual abuse, violence, entrapment, racism, corruption and sexism. In the proposed production, it will therefore be integral to be perpetually engaged with the many cast and crew reliant upon my guidance, so that the concept can be executed with full ensemble conviction. My challenges will be to avoid trite sentimentality and maintain a vision of truth with the text. My overall concept will be to expose prejudice in characters, while concurrently streamlining my research on the numerous themes so as to not overwhelm the ensemble or the audience.

One of the reasons I decided to work on *Venus* for this thesis was due to the complex possibilities of multicultural casting. Being of mixed-race ethnicity myself, I knew I wanted to do a play that would not conform to the assumptive Caucasian leading roles. I was well aware of the many ethnically diverse actors available to me through the York University Theatre Program and was determined to take full advantage of this spectrum of talent. I have cast the play, taking liberties with race only where appropriate, so the audience will see all groupings in the flesh, nothing hidden. The book, *The Problem of the Color[blind]* states that “Color-Blind = ‘People of color — we don't see you (at least not that bad ‘colored’ part)’” (Catanese 137). An audience will have its own preconceptions with whomever I cast, the notion of ‘Colour blind casting’, a form of underhanded ingrouping. My concept will be to expose all colours as they are, utilizing actors’ and designers’ individual identities to full advantage.

Venus strongly suggests that two of the leads, *The Venus* and *The Negro Resurrectionist*, be actors of colour. This aspect has caused ripples of unrest among some students who are not used to the real possibility that traditionally ‘white’ roles are becoming less and less the status

quo. Suddenly, students will be asked to experience an outgroup role, a realistic depiction of the Canadian mosaic. I took further liberties in dismantling presumed casting, assigning the role of The Brother to a mixed-race Aboriginal-Canadian woman and The Man's part to an African-American woman. Parks does have females play male roles in her scripted suggestions for casting (vii) which I often follow through with, but the freedom to use actors of distinct races in traditionally 'white' roles is a skin colour design element that I will not make blind. I have also taken artistic liberties by casting two black women as a Chorus of Venus', which is not designated in the script by Parks. Without obscuring the text, they will deliver all the direct address lines of The Venus, showing in a subtle and simple way, how this individual icon of racial intolerance has evolved into a strong bond of sisterhood.

Another casting choice is for the entire Chorus of the 8 Human Wonders to be women, highlighting the outgroup discrimination men have placed upon females over time. This objective view of the female Chorus will be representative of women's gradual rise in stature, in juxtaposition with the subjective Venus' ascent to the modern-day black woman icon of power in North America.

Referentially, I aim to convey the historical tapestry of South African colonization, the Napoleonic Wars, human anatomy, freak shows, feminism, racism, abolition, neoclassicism, romanticism and The Venus herself. It is my objective to layer my thesis production with depictions of this research in terms of set, costume, light, sound and dialects. The main elements I have communicated to my design team have been distilled down to curves and height, all of the early 19th century period. More specifically, the design will take on an orbital shape, mirroring the curved streets of London and Paris and the endless circles of South African struggles due to colonization. This, paired with the anatomical curves of The Venus herself, will permeate the

whole ensemble from pre-production to closing night.

There will be three distinct design locations, beginning with the emptiness of The Venus' destitute homeland of her South African Khoisan tribe (Holmes 9), moving to the gritty bustling neoclassic London, and finally blossoming to the post-revolutionary romance of Paris. The set will need to find a way to revolve within these locations as Parks often has the stage direction to orbit (134). The use of stairs curved upstage in a semi-circular pattern will allow for a pedestal where The Venus might be displayed as she faces the audience from a distance. The Chorus of Spectators will stand downstage peering into the audience as if watching the Venus who is actually erected upstage, a convention utilized to enhance the reactions of disgust from crowds who attend The Venus show. This method of gazing into the audience while the main action occurs simultaneously upstage was utilized successfully in Parks' new play, *Father Comes Home From The Wars Parts 1, 2 & 3*, that I witnessed in October of 2014 at New York's Public Theatre.

Lighting will be portrayed as seasonal sunlight during day scenes and replicated Argand lamplight by night, staying true to the resources of the time (Moody 51-2). The gels used will be chosen sensitively as not to wash out darker skinned actors unless used for satirical effect. Music will emanate through speakers as necessary, providing a lyrical undertone. Parks preference of Opera for *Venus* (Greene 144) will be respected in this regard, an exciting prospect for me as it is a format I am personally not well versed in. This, mixed sporadically with blends of modern Hip Hop and Rap beats, will ideally layer the production with the sense of anachronism that subtly exist throughout the text.

The actors themselves will need to be exposed to the architecture of curves and height early in rehearsal so that they will be able to take ownership of the many images and locations

through devised work in rehearsals. This in turn will eliminate the need for an overabundance of props and set pieces that often clutter stages that I direct, thus addressing my challenge to simplify. In addition, with a curved platform of waist-height stairs available, there will be multiple levels to utilize with wild abandon, with abundant entrances and exits handy for this fast-paced piece of an episodic nature.

Through a vocabulary of gestures and movements, actors will appropriate needed stage business with my creative guidance adhering to such stage directions such as: ‘knots’, ‘riots’ or ‘orbits’. The biggest challenge will be how to literally shape the actor playing The Venus as she is constantly described as having a large buttocks and a miniature stature. The actor cast is taller than most of the ensemble, so a discussion about how to manipulate her appearance to seem shorter than others will be an intriguing problem to solve. As to the buttocks, I would like The Venus actor, along with her Chorus, to physically inhabit the steatopygia of The Venus through physical exploration alone.

As the play is written with scenes counting backwards, I will begin at the end with The Venus as she is historically after death: a wax cast display atop a hill in a Paris Museum. Actors opposite The Venus will then inversely rise above her early on (as with the towering Westminster Hall through the Chorus of the Courts), and then diminish underneath (as with the punitive masturbating Chorus of the Anatomists in Paris). The prejudicial eyes of masked history will then come full circle to her resting place with the final image of her buried as dust in her native South Africa.

When in London, actors in the play-within-a-play will exaggerate period British accents, reflecting our North American jeering of their posh way of talking. In Paris, all actors will speak their own Canadian accents, emphasizing the comfortable mood The Venus is fooled into,

equaling our country's understated biases against foreigners. The Negro Resurrectionist will take on the role of stand-up comic or rapper, a poignant reminder of the African-American male lineage in duality with the female. Icons such as comedians Bill Cosby, Richard Pryor, Eddie Murphy and Chris Rock or rappers Ice T, Snoop Doggy Dog, Biggy Smalls or Kanye West will figure throughout his narration as devised by director and actor staying relevant to the text. Overall, actors will be persuaded to learn Parks' distinctive syntax of poetic African-American lingo, emphasizing the need for all dialogue to come across as confident and open-mouthed.

The element of anatomical dissection is another area to explore, as the play slowly strips away at The Venus in reverse. In the beginning I envision her as scattered about in solitude, her Venus Chorus not yet part of the scenery. By the end, the Venus Chorus will congeal to represent black female icons in history, 'twerks' and all. This reverse dissecting image will present itself through designs of anatomy theatres of the time, which were historically isomorphic in shape to the human eye for in-the-round observation (Bleeker 18). Most of the set will be cut off far upstage and to the sides, forming this intimate isomorphic curve.

The costumes will be of the period, men influenced by Georgian and Napoleonic styles, the women in slim fitting dresses to hide the body's curves (Anderson 57), contrasting The Venus' large buttocks. The Chorus of The 8 Human Wonders will wear half-masks taken from Human Freak examples given throughout the era in concert with Parks' grotesque description of each. Layered into the mask design will be Picasso's African Period and Jean-Michel Basquiat's colour palette for inspiration. The Venus too will then earn a mask to represent her place in the Freak Show. The South African setting will adhere to wardrobe references known of the day, again these styles emphasizing curves and height. The Chorus of the Court will explore anachronistic appropriations of black traditions, each donning gospel gowns in an attempt to

empathize with an aspect of the African-American experience. The challenge will be attaining all these renderings through a predominantly Afrocentric lens, thereby staying loyal to Parks' intent of retelling this tale.

In true Parks inciting fashion, one of the play's later scenes has a Caucasian character masquerading as a Hottentot Venus which, "recalls and anticipates the long history of blackface and other practices of misrepresentation through which the mandates for black performance practices have emerged, and establishes continuities between the misapprehension of (female) blackness in performance" (Catanese 129). I was personally subjected to this act of abjection only seven years ago as an actor at the Stratford Festival of Canada where I was to don dark makeup, covering my paler Caribbean skin-tone in order to portray an African. I will never forget the catatonic state experienced while staring at myself in that mirror. I can imagine the humiliation The Venus must have felt when groped and molested during her entire European career, finally succumbing to her white superiors in court with those haunting cryptic words: "I came here black. Give me the chance to leave here white". By having the Caucasian Bride-to-Be character simply put on The Venus mask in this pivotal scene, the desire by some to appear black will largely echo this sentiment.

Chapter 7. Conclusion

The Venus Hottentot icon is a part of our colonial heritage as Canadians through which our roots are dug deep across the Atlantic Ocean. She is relevant because she symbolizes the prejudice surrounding all citizens, no matter the colour. Our neighbors to the south bear their racial past far more openly than we do with their black female icons either praised as Goddess-like Venus' or condescended as lowly Hottentots. More and more culturally diverse artists in Canada are challenging our suppressed prejudicial voices in this country such as playwrights Djanet Sears or Tomson Highway with their Rev & Rep style narratives on par with Parks. The unique feature about Parks in particular, is that her continental scope with *Venus* implicates us all in the politics of discrimination by erasing borders. She nudges audiences to view exactly what is there in front of them, rather than skimming the polite surface so often fed to us in Canadian grade schools. It is in fact *The Grade-School Chum* that forces *The Baron* to awake from his romantic dreams about the love of his Venus, just as we in Canada often need a wake up call to the damaging bigoted issues faced on our own pillaged soil.

It is hard to ignore the racial tensions ongoing in America, including very recent white police killings of unarmed black citizens. Why do our Canadian sensibilities let this sort of injustice fade away into the courts, such as with the shooting of Syrian-born Sammy Yatim in Toronto in 2013? Is it better or worse to be violent citizens against the establishment in these situations, as is often passionately happening in the States? Parks proposes this aggression when "The Chorus of the Spectators bursts into a riot" (145) in response to *The Venus*' attempt to assimilate white culture. Are black females legitimately integrated within the fabric of North American society, or are they always prejudged as lower class citizens in everyday situations? The biases are within individuals themselves and that is what Parks wants her audience to feel.

As Bill Walters said of his 2006 student production of *Venus* at Hunter College, “We had some really lovely discussions with the cast right from the beginning. Especially since I was working with students, I really felt like I had to address the topics and the themes of the play with them, and of course, as you can imagine, we never reached any kind of consensus whatsoever. And that’s exactly the point of the work, as Suzan-Lori Parks says” (Kalb). I am confident that all the actors will be contested to confront their own personal and artistic challenges about prejudice, affording provocative discussions for both ensemble and audience as is frequently supported by the text. The intimate and simple set will flow effortlessly from one segment to the next where spectators will become the spectacle, as was often the attraction in London theatres of the day (Moody 63).

The person sitting to your left may be of an outgroup to whom your shared experience of The Venus story will be shaped by that person’s colour or age or size. If they are of an ingroup, the experience will be altered another way. Whatever the case may be, my thesis production of *Venus* will be as closely tied to the text as possible, attesting that a play as well crafted as this one needs very little in the way of bells and whistles to affect people on a humanly provocative level. The roots of black female iconography will be the launching pad that invites an audience into a wide-open arena of unabashed truths.

Chapter 8. Select Journals

July 29, 2014

Landed in London, U.K. today, my first time ever. This was a decision I made only recently, to discover the cities of London and then Paris, much like Sara would have. Naturally, this will not be the same exactly, this being 2014, not 1810, modern technology allowing journal entries on a computer, instead of a notebook. Needless to say, I am here, for the feeling, to get a sense of the timelessness of the history revolving around this place and the next. Autumn Smith, my partner in crime, is accompanying me for the first leg, she having lived here before and also doing research on London (The Great War). First impressions thus far: no gridded streets, driving on the left, easily lost, 3-storey buildings, no condos, stacked, quiet streets (we are staying in Fulham, 33 Filmer Street), train ride in looked like Scarborough, gorgeous day about 28 degrees, Airbnb rental small but to the point, ethnic diversity, unsure where safe and unsafe spots are, again easily lost.

The plan today is to explore the spots Sara would have ventured like Piccadilly, Haymarket, Covent Garden, Westminster Hall courts, etc. to have my personal first experience as she might have. In a roundabout way, we both got here by the Atlantic Ocean, her path slightly more extensive and by boat of course. I suppose I might look up the school Suzan-Lori Parks attended here, though not sure how useful that would be. I will save her research for New York in the fall I think.

I do hope to get some thesis writing under the belt this trip. That is the purpose after all. I will make it happen. Just steal time away when I can and see what inspiration has to contribute at this point. Meantime, off to the races we go...

October 3, 2014

First company meeting with the production team today. My prep was to convey all my ideas from the summer's research into a cohesive presentation to get the designers started on their journey. My biggest fear was that I would not have enough to say. Boy was I wrong. I had dozens of images printed and loads of notes ready to discuss, plus videos and music. I spoke for about twenty minutes to half an hour is my guess, and I could have gone on much longer. I am discovering that I already know way more than I think about this play and its author, and my next challenge will be in simplifying the information as I had set out to do originally. My tendency is to be overly enthusiastic and perhaps it may overwhelm those who haven't had the opportunity to explore the material in depth as I have. In the end, the costume, set, light and sound team were all on board with my thoughts, even exchanging wonderful ideas of their own in the moment. I am very pleased with the set and costume personnel assigned to me, both of African-Canadian backgrounds, which in the past has always been an undervalued component of plays like this where ethnicity is of significance. They are both young talents whose work I have seen in presentations last year, and I am thrilled to dive into neoclassicism, romanticism and South African colonization through Afro-centric eyes.

My assistant director has been of extreme value already, his eagerness to learn an asset much to be admired in this process. He has been delving into the world of opera, a stream of music I am interested in following for an underscore. I also gave him a major research project, answering some of the essential Katie Mitchell questions that will aid in the simplicity of the production. Overall, this looks and feels like the right show to do, having now talked with my production team in person, and having initial contact with some of the actors as well, specifically with three grad actors who are using *Venus* as their thesis roles. Seems I scared most of the grads

away from a very meaty piece, and I question why that is. The perception may be that they will have very little to do as Chorus members, but rest assured, they will be fully involved in this process as members of the whole ensemble, tech and all.

Of additional note, my set designer was most excited by height, imagining tall buildings of London. My costume designer asked if we were going circus or showgirls. I said circus and she smiled in excitement. I must remember and hold onto these nuggets of gut information and let them play.

October 9, 2014

We did the first official walkthrough of the FFT tonight. The costume designer was the only one not present, but it was an excellent opportunity to begin a dialogue with the set designer. She has a great idea of creating forced perspective scenery for London and Paris. We discussed the orchestra pit and its options for removal and agreed that removing it could work if we removed seats as well, giving room for spectators. Then again, there is plenty of room on the stage for 23 actors at once. We saw bodies in the space and were able to easily see where people disappeared and where they were best suited. The spacing will be key to staging this play from day one in order that the transition to the space is an easy adjustment for actors not familiar with it.

We discussed levels, spiral staircases being an exciting option as they take up less space than straight up ones. Possible rakes could create the theatre of anatomy, but that comes with a host of problems. The challenge will be keeping this stage intimate in such a large arena. The red curtain closed makes bodies look tiny on the apron front, a great recall to the massive stages of the day. Could be for Negro Ressurrectionist or for play-within-play scenes. Overall, the plan to stay simple was the main focus, and it certainly feels achievable thus far in a complicated space

with a complex script. The challenge will be how the set moves (flies?) in order that it reflects the text best.

January 27, 2015

I sit in the grad room of the Scott library, in anticipation of the company meeting tonight at 7. I meet the actors at 6 for a brief intro to the world of Venus. We read aloud the first act, minus the Court Chorus, for all the first year students and the crew. Then we head back to rehearsal to read the rest. My feelings? Calm. What else to say? I feel like I have covered every inch of this thing and am finally able to enter the “Carnival” phase of my work. Hard to believe I have been living with this baby for over a year now. Just plug in actors and press play. Being an actor for so long, I’ve never had the knowledge of what this comfortable feeling of preparedness really is. Maybe sometimes when preparing for a role, but I always felt I never really knew everything. Not that I know everything now, but I sure do have a clear direction that others will need to follow. In fact, it is the little that I don’t know (like the actor’s work in the moment), that excites me the most. I can honestly just nudge them one way or another and feel that I’ll get results.

There have been developments already, adding to the feeling of a positive experience to come. My Court Leader and Mother actress is no longer with the show due to illness, which in the end spreads roles out more evenly for the cast. It was a simple fix. My composers are eager to write songs for me. The set has safety measures in place. Our Stage Manager is on the ball, though many emails back and forth about scheduling have had to happen as she is still learning the ropes of getting it right the first time. I like her calmness though, and know it will permeate throughout the room. We are going to need it. Patience and calm, calm and patience. Here we go.

January 28, 2015

Well that went better than expected. I stayed calm as a cucumber and delivered a very passionate speech about the nature of this show, with particular emphasis on the perversion of history due to prejudice. I had my notes prepared for the big company intro to launch from, and from there I was able to articulate clearly and effectively. My designers seemed to fumble for some reason, fear of the crowd I suppose. But they had nice power points.

Of real value was the read-through, as I am confident I have the perfect cast. What a relief. Some were a little more understated than others (Negro Ressurrectionist and Baron Docteur), and I will have to probe that early in the process so the pattern does not continue. I have scheduled individual text work to move that along as soon as possible. Others were spot on, paying excellent attention to the details of Suzan-Lori Parks' style of text. I encouraged all to stay true to the poetic cadence of the script, as it will guide you every time.

Another positive was that with all the script revisions and cutting and pasting and reassigned roles, the cast was all on the same page, only minor missed cues or script fumbling for pages. To finally have these characters breath outside the recesses of my mind was a huge relief. The carnival has truly begun.

There was a question asked of the human wonders as to the approach to movement, whether they were physically disabled or just putting it on for show. I gave a long-winded answer and not on what was asked specifically. An early lesson for me to stay on task, really hear the question, have them repeat if necessary, and solve as best I can in that moment.

January 29-30, 2015

First three real full days of rehearsal flew by. This is a good thing. Time time time. The play is about time. A time and a place and several of them all at once. The buzz is good so far. Folks are pleased just having a schedule to rely on.

My cast discussion was a purging of all my ideas to date, and I really feel I did what I set out to do, which was not to overwhelm, but inspire. I had my AD do a fifteen-minute presentation on colonization and then on Suzan-Lori Parks. The dialect faculty coach gave a twenty-minute reminder about the American vocal sound. I delivered a forty-five minute layout of the world we will be creating. And then I put the premise out on the table. I asked them, what is prejudice? They answered with wonderful insights for myself, and with cohesiveness with my understanding of it. Surprising notes were notions of curiosity and embarrassment: are they prejudice? When you can't help but look because it is different? I will continue to push this button as we go.

With the Overture, I began losing some confidence as I really didn't know how to answer questions about intention, since we need to stage the whole play first to inform this opening, foreshadowing picture. The staged positions were as I wanted them and that was good enough for now. The rest will follow.

Working the Southern Africa scene was very interesting as I went the improv route. Both actors of *The Man and The Man's Brother*, answered two key questions for me that I have been struggling with in this very paper. One: they are indeed not brothers, but grew up together, one in a black African tribal family of wealth, the other in a poor Dutch family. The status game changes when the rich becomes the enabler of his fellow African, Saartjie. Two: the joke they shared with their parents in the past is simply the innocence of childhood, teasing a big-bottomed

girl. On top of this, we found the moment before the scene happens, enabling them to launch into it with precision. One thing I will have to watch for is not letting The Man fall into smiling sentiment and pathos for Saartjie. Choices need to be made about the prevailing prejudice experienced by her tribe for two centuries.

Working with the Wonders is clearly becoming about movement. The body will have to undulate from the spine organically, and the text will follow through. I noticed that I had cast only women as the Wonders, which was a very intelligent idea on my part. The bond of femininity is as close to relating to a gang of freaks as we can muster in this environment. This is not saying females are freaks, I am just saying that the unity of a particular group, in this case gender, will automatically bond them in the show they must put on for that London crowd. It is an easy in and understanding of each other, especially in terms of bodies in motion.

Lastly, scheduling is taking up way too much time, but I suppose that is just part of it. My stage manager is getting better, she really is, but I am finding it too time consuming at this point, as schedules keep changing around me for coachings, fight directors, composers, etc. It's a good thing I really like this play, and an even better thing that I am loving this cast.

Oh, did a fab improv with the Players in the play-in-play. Had the senior grad actors play as company managers who held an audition for the younger members. The younger ones did not know what was happening and came in the room to meet two very snooty casting directors. All this, after an in-depth chat with York's guru of speech and text about British RP on the 1800's stage. Oh, they have stepped into a load of fun with this one.

Final note, my leads Venus and Negro Ressurectonist are doing incredible work. Natural and easy with the text as I predicted. Little bits of guidance here and there and they take it with heart and joy.

Feb. 10, 2015

So, finished staging this beast. Mini celebration! Can't get too excited yet. Must remain in the moment. Loads of work to come. I anticipate a few more grumbles down the line as we head into eight-hour days after the Reading week break, but for now, I feel that I have reached a Zen calm in the room. We did the final scene with the entire ensemble (missing two actors due to flu), and I owned that room. They were all in. We reworked the Overture, and solidified my concept of audience direct address and its conversational nature. It works, it really works! It is the same concept used in Parks' recent production I saw in New York; a commonality in her Chorus style approach of welcoming the audience into the world, a strange world, where the line between theatre and audience and story interweave inconspicuously.

So, Run of Act one tomorrow. Run of Act two the next day. Let us see what Carnival has brought forth. Has the work paid off for draft one of my vision? Our vision. The skeleton, next are the veins and capillaries. First, we play.

Feb. 24, 2015

Back at it in full force, letting the drive of the play dictate

Why this play was a play in the first place after all

Subway writings and late night stridings

Looking for meaning in anything.

This theme this race this taste of innocence

This understated, undulated, misrelated

Philanthropic play.

She weaves and bobs and holds your hand

Then gently shoves you off

How sordid is this love affair

Of issues fancy free

The Chorus Venus dances about

Do they even know the score?

I relegate and dissipate I sometimes don't know what for.

Filling time

Making space

Understanding place.

This time its real this thing of art

This thing that does not suck.

One Two Three

Push the way in. Each actor aboard the board in his or her own way.

“Pace and cues and volume please”. This can't be all there is.

Honestly lost for words at times, I dictate what I see.

What is said and then heard, not always full from me.

This is it, the end my friends. The process almost dead.

Sink those teeth in deep and sharp, the fun has just begun.

Feb. 26

An amazing thing happens with actors who get too comfortable. They get lazy. They enter with strength and then forget that the work needs to be applied. Just today, had a lovely afternoon session with Wonders, fine tuning and massaging the text. This evening: nada, all in the trash. How can all that work disappear in one fell swoop? Not all, but some.

There needs to be a consistency and I am not yet seeing it. There are moments where the drive, the intention, the swings, states and triggers all jive, but there is a resistance to this text that is fascinating to watch. They can't quite get the rhythms the way my two black actor leads do. The cadence is the poetry, and the struggle is fascinating to watch. They want to say it's the script's fault, but they just can't handle the beats. None of this is aggressive or overt, just subtle ways that actors sit back in the work.

The part I am enjoying with it all is that it is not coming out onto me. They are struggling in their own personal ways. I envy it slightly, yet I am living it too. I fumble for ways to give a note, for ways to communicate. Instead of, "what do you think?" I'll say, "I think you should move there." Part of me just wants to get on with it. The other part just sees problems before they happen.

I am at the point where I need to let the script leave my hands too, as they begin imparting words without ink. The text has been so vital to this point. Now I desire to hear it happen.

Feb. 27

Full run of Act 1. Still too long. My Mothershowman actor holds the length that needs to be cut. I cannot rush her. She needs time to find her way through this navigation. It hurts her, but she knows it will come too. I know it will come.

My Wonders are losing steam, and fast. I have to keep them on task before costumes and masks and set become their reality. This shit ain't gonna get any easier.

I don't know what else to say. I am excited to see the first full run tomorrow, with intermission. I love watching this play.

Nikki Minaj: she is the curtain call music, the history of black female iconography up to today. Her Anaconda album inspires our publicity poster. She will take us into the present. She will prove my thesis true.

Side note: My Venus had a rough day yesterday, but hung in there. I saw it, and had a talk with her after rehearsal. I Just told her to pace herself. Can't push her too far just yet. Let her sink her teeth in at her own level and comfort. So many other elements yet to come.

(U of T decided NOT to strike today. Hopeful the same comes true for York come Tuesday.)

Feb. 28, 2015

Design flaw? A shocking realization today that the first few rows may actual not be able to see the Venus action upstage on her pedestal when Spectators are downstage centre. She is up six feet, but that does not ensure audience will see over the downstage actors' heads. A quick email has been sent out to address this issue.

On a lighter note, run through number one happened, without major glitches. Hooray. It was compelling, I have to say, and I can see where the work still needs enhancements. Maintaining a consistent energy level from beginning to end will be the goal, as young actors like the Ressurrectionist and The Venus, dipped in and out of brilliance. They will get there, I know, but it is a lengthier show than they are used to at such a high level of intensity and emotion.

No other major issues other than pace and cues which are getting tighter. First act at one hour, eighteen minutes is too long, but second act at 49 minutes is right on target. Need to shave eight minutes off act one, and Mothersshowman is working towards that for sure; loads of lines,

all very similar, that she has to belt out and move on. She knows this and is getting there like a fine wine.

Tech chats have begun. Sound design is on its way, cues ready to be plugged in next week. Lighting chat, we are on the same page about what the looks should be. Full paper tech with SM on Monday evening.

A note about Monday, I will attend the CUPE strike meeting to get an idea about the possible strike and to vote against striking. Unions are a part of working life, I understand that, and it is something I remember former Stratford Festival Artistic Director, Richard Monette once ranted on about in a rage many years ago in rehearsals. He hated Unions. I don't hate them, but realize they need to be tolerated. This is a learning institution and I am tolerating it, and the actor students need to get used to unions as a significant part of their lives. How to apply this to the creative process? We'll see. Perhaps the passion from the CUPE meetings is equivalent to the demands for Venus' release 200 years ago? It's a stretch I know, but I still need fuel to feed the actors for these hopefully last two weeks of rehearsal. Why do they do the Overture? Why do they flip flop in Court? Answers that may be needed, but ultimately I'd prefer them not answered. Let the audience decide, and actors just say the words. Find meaning for yourself sometimes and let the director do his work. I have a really good show here, I truly believe that, and it would be a shame to lose it all, like the lost theatre season of 1813 England, due to protests and unrest.

March 3, 2015

Strike

March 11, 2015

It has been a trying time this past week and a half. The decision now is: will I do a postponed show even if the strike continues, meaning I would have to cut some actors if they choose not to perform under the University's attempt to push student's back to classes. OR, do I wait it out, possibly not doing the show until the strike ends, which could mean losing actors if the strike goes on too long into other commitments. Here is a sample from an email I had sent to cast members trying to ease the situation:

As has been the case throughout the past several days, you do not have to be there tomorrow through Saturday in the Theatre. I will be there 10 to 6 each day because I am eager to see how that space works before we officially get back. I think my eagerness may have come across as compromising to some. I apologize. For those who are able, feel free to join any time each day and we will work whatever we want with whomever is there. I know there will be many absent for various reasons and I promise you that is perfectly fine.

As I said today, we are ready to go with this show when the time is right, and again, thank you all for making the difficult choice to meet today.

The show on many levels is about agency, prejudice, segregation and legacy. My aim as director is to keep making daily choices that can acknowledge my personal prejudice and put them aside for the sake of avoiding segregation in the group, so that our legacy will be one of strength in the face of the challenges ahead.

Get good sleep. I will see you when I see you. Keep sending me emails or give me a call anytime. I am always willing to talk things out.

March 15, 2015

The past few days have been somethin'. Those who are there and those who ain't. To line or not to line. Seein' the set in place, with no production in its place. Placing those who attend in motion on fluid steps and footlights non-aglow, undermining in some people's minds. These days have been long but short. Not a production personnel in sight, only techie-type technicians ambling in and out as a paid unit of looking out over us, no involvement of any kind. Walked through all we could, lost sleep in the process, dealing with emails of misconstrued ideas, my instinct to lash out held fast against my quiet tongue. These days are up and down these days are noisy in my head. One comes in, does the safety walk dance, hears some faculty spewage, and

leaves empty handed, no longer part of the process with the rest. I don't understand, but yet I do and I don't like it. I don't. But I hold my tongue, let them talk among themselves. The challenge is to be with them until the end. This week was to be the end. Not quite...

Looking ahead, five MFAs to go, five interests in mind, five eager lab rats as we call them, organisms living in my study. We gotta get them through. I make my proposal and it passes with the king rats. Gonna put this thing up no matter what we say, gonna walk about the stage in glorious presentation, unmounted, on time, three shows on the weekend, rehearse after hours, no physical boundary lines to cross. What is wrong with that? I see many holes already. I see those who have been absent not willing to return no matter the score. I see resentment and hostility in those who were here to have to fill others in on what they missed. There are a whole host of problems to come from production side, how many undergrads not able to fulfill their part of the bargain, me, not fulfilling my challenge by leaving them behind. There are a number of things that still need to be addressed, there are no dresses, there are no lights there is no sound there is no unity, a fragmented show of labour of those who can, those who will and those who will not. It is orchestrating madness, a fitting scenario for such a divisive and scattered play. Thank you Suzan-Lori Parks for channelling your wares my way. I mean that in all sincerity ;)

March 16, 2015

This is the day the show officially died.

March 17, 2015

Everyone is on board with the proposed studio plan, except one.

We spent Monday setting up the new environment. Ideas were allowed to be flung about, and it was in some ways offensive. There seemed to be this desire to throw away all the work we had done to that point and replace it with an entirely new vision. Talk about stabbing me in the

back. Did those folks really hate my process that much? Really? Not an easy pill to swallow, but I did. I swallowed and swallowed and swallowed and let them rule the roost in their own way so as I might let something sink in eventually. I sunk it into my gullet, swilling back pint after pint that night, ending with the perfect scotch to taste it off. None of this is easy. None at all.

Tuesday, the meeting of the production undergraduates to break the news. You've never seen such a sombre annihilation of emotions. These kids will never see their work in the flesh. The set must be struck by Saturday, no way around it. Ironically, an international gospel choir is on its way in. Our Court gospel is on its friggin' way out. I spoke: "You must let this sink in and you must process this information before you can really start thinking creatively. But the momentum is there and you must move forward now." I did not tear, I only said Fuck! A couple times. They applauded. They applauded, uh-gain. Off to rehearsal.

Restaging is the hardest thing. I cannot let the old vision go. But I must. There must be some good out of this. Is it a Jean-Michel Basquiat painting that has been painted over several times, so the undercurrent lingers below? Splash the paint, dab the corners, do whatever is necessary to hide the old truth. History perverted. Truth restored. Confused and tired. I sleep.

March 20, 2015

It is officially spring. 2:46 PM. Actually four minutes away to be precise. Winter comes to a close. Rebirth begins. Sitting at Hemingways in Yorkville with a pint of "Downtown Brown". Dress rehearsal last night was awful. Got through it with bumps and scars. Appropriate, as a bad dress leads to a fantastic opening. There's a premise for you. What to get my cast for opening? Can I even call it opening? Academically, I have to and I have to have a closing tomorrow night too. Mother submits. I submit.

It is Spring. Praise the Lord!

How can all of this help me grow as an artist? Questions and questions swirl in the brain. How how how? I have faith in this ensemble, as tattered and torn as they are. They will deliver because they believe in me. What more can I ask for as a director? I will give them a little speech. Choices and Love; hold onto those two little pieces and let them get you through the night. Make bold choices, any choice as long as you make one, please. And keep the love between you for two more nights. Let Venus guide your ways.

I have to speak to the gathered masses coming to see our skit. What to say to them? I do not know yet. It will have to be a choice that I make in that moment. And I will decide.

Two more journal entries after this, likely to come with a flurry of expletives. I simply await the truth of this fiction, the reimagined history that we have created, the long and dreary path that is the failure of art, the continual let down and perishable nightmare of love gone all wrong. What a business we got ourselves into. What a tragedy and comedy we have embarked upon. Don't pity me, please. It is all who suffer, and I am only one piece of the puzzle, one taste of the pie. I see the pictures of the set on display under lights of spectacle, the orchestrated beauty of colours in flux, the months and months and months of work that were prepped and progressing. I direct their project too, as they build a ceremony memorial in ruins. They insist on remount, I balk in jest silently. Where can this show go after this? Is there another home? I wonder, oh God, I wonder. I wander the world.

Spring has sprung, only ten minutes old. The rooftop patio is just a-budding, the taps a-flowing, the servers a-flutter and my show a-muck. I have not thrown a thing yet, though I want to. I have not yelled or blamed, because there is no one person to blame. I can only ask for more love. Had the perfect lunch with my wife, saw my children all morning, enjoyed my latte and beer, the sunlight on my face. I suppose there wont be inny show tonight, if I stay in this funk.

There will be a show and it will be fantastic. There will be a silver lining that unifies us all. The end is nowhere near the end. The beginning is in sight.

March 22, 2015

Show 1: OPENING. March 21. 5:45 PM: Run the choral sections. 6:00 PM: Run the fights and dances. I run to the bathroom and expel what has been held inside these past several weeks. Vomitus and out of control, my insides leave the body for a final goodbye to the stress that has been building. Yes, likely the flu bug my daughter had caught just a few days prior, but I was especially prone to it in this capsule of time. 7:30 PM: The show begins after a very short speech explaining our situation. Here is how I describe it:

Nausea and fear and listening to them breath, the audience I mean. About 60 of them there, a full house for our space, and I did not hear the satire I had imagined. I heard a different story I had not expected. I heard the tragedy that fell upon our hero. I heard the sadness and the pain, but we never played it that way! We never played it for laughs either, mind you, but the words and poetry just sounded their way to the top. It was the unity and harmony of ensemble collaborations that rose to the occasion. They were a force that needed to be heard. Amongst notes and pens and judges and friends, the show went on. It went on and nobody could stop us. How often do you get to perform a show that does not exist? A show that is officially cancelled?

The nausea never passed, intermission in the can again. I can't tell you how horrible that felt, except to say, I refused to leave them, to disappear from the fear. The fear was lifted quickly as each new step in the journey brought us closer to the end. The countdown, the ups the downs, the love the hate, all in glorious light, no elements but the oral African tradition of telling us a story. We told it and it was right. We told it and it went all right. We told it and they responded in awe, in unknowing anything like it. What will I take from all of this? How do you move on? I

came here to see if I really liked this sort of thing. I don't know if I have that answer yet. I left the show feeling more nausea and indeed released more bile via home. Spending the next day resting was all that was left. Opening was over. Closing was less than 24 hours away.

Show 2: CLOSING. It was a 24-hour virus and had subsided by the time I got to the studio. Funny, I wanted to say theatre, but it is the studio. It is a studio showing. Spent the day sleeping it all away, nothing really digesting yet. Took the longest subway ride up to campus, of course shuttle buses from St. George to Lawrence West. An extra hour to my journey. But with time warped as it has been lately, it really didn't make a difference at all. If anything, it allowed me to trust the actors to warm themselves up, be on their own, let them take flight. And they did.

It was an out-of-body feeling this night. The show made all sense: "There wont b inny show tonite", was the rev and rep that tied it all together from beginning to end. I heard it like I've never heard it before. The actors remained calm, yet invested. The audience was no longer intimidating, only warm and inviting. Actors finally locked eyes and really heard one another. Mistakes were few, and those that were, created some magical moments of silence and surprise. I really didn't know what was to happen next. I was not sad, I chuckled silently to myself, the crowd did too. It was a show that didn't let you escape, nearly three-quarters staying for the entire intermission. How many times can you hear about her body parts? How full the words take hold. We ripped up spike tape in the process, the ruins of a room of yore. It was a mild celebration of work that was two weeks away from fullness, but in the end I accomplished what I set out to do: stay with them until the very end, and keep it simple. I am still working with the production team to fulfill that part, but in terms of simple, you couldn't have had a more straightforward telling of this complex story, distilled down to the essential roots of choices and love. I told my cast before opening exactly that: make bold choices, any choice, but make them. And

find the love for each other, despite all that had gone on, find the love to support each other on the two hour and twenty minute show that never was.

Chapter 9. Epilogue

“I regret to inform you that the Venus Hottentot iz dead. There wont b inny show tonite” (Parks, *Venus* 3). Never has a statement made such a prophetic impact upon a theatrical non-event. Hearing those words performed in a flurry of rev and rep during the Overture of *Venus*, made pure the old adage that art imitates life. Our show *Venus* was to be presented at York University’s Faire Fecan Theatre, but never happened due to circumstances beyond our control. A lengthy strike by a teachers union (which I happened to be part of) began on the day we were to start rehearsals on stage, causing vast ripples in the collaborative process that had been solid up to that point. In the end, as a result of weekly, daily and hourly decisions amongst departments, faculty and myself, the show that never happened was given two of the most riveting studio presentations over as many nights. The planned full week of performances on stage, was reduced to a mere Friday and Saturday evening showing for an unadvertised audience of faculty, family and friends in the rehearsal space. The 120 witnesses who experienced its power will likely never forget the feeling of that night, after two hours and twenty minutes among bonded artists contained in the very room where rehearsals first began to take flight; without intended lights, sound, costumes or props. The text was the glue that kept it all together, serving its purpose as I had first set it out to do.

Despite my personal stress and illness throughout the three-week incubation period between the strike and the presentations, the opening and closing night shows proved to address my director’s challenges in ways I could never have imagined when first embarking upon this journey over a year ago. The challenge to avoid sentimentality was achieved successfully; however the unfortunate predicament we faced in severing the fully mounted show was a sentiment that could not be prevented. My challenge to tell this story in a simple manner was

realized entirely, the surrounding political situation forcing all excessive production elements to be eliminated entirely. In those two studio showings, *Venus* was told aloud as written, recalling the lineage of traditional South African oral storytelling. Conversely, the entire production team created an inspirational museum-type display of their work without a word of text or a single cast member used in it. This painting of *Venus* was illuminated in as fragmented and segregated a way as Parks intended it to be, while maintaining the integrity contained within its canvas.

My habit of abandoning cast and crew before they are ready to take over for themselves was challenged to the very end, as I assured each that the show must go on in whatever format possible, myself leading the charge every step of the way. I was with them from first design meetings to day one of rehearsals to final presentations, propelling my passion and research knowledge forward with a clear and pointed premise: Prejudicial Eyes Lead to Perverted Histories. All who performed and saw our presentations knew of the surrounding University disruptions and came in with prejudice swirling in their hearts and minds. The gazing eyes, both at performer and spectator, created a magical world made possible because of the judgmental backdrop. The history of this show itself will be perverted throughout York University lore, as it never officially happened. Only those who were said to be there will be able to express their perception of what they claimed to have seen. Much like the story of *The Venus* herself, history will shape the influence of these showings for generations to come.

The bigger question couched within the broader context is how *Venus* provokes us to ponder the roots of black female iconography, from historical freaks to contemporary sexualized objects, for better or for worse. What amazed me about these presentations was that the rev and rep of *The Venus*' sexual body parts demanded audiences to remain riveted and yet stilted in their response to what humanity has done to post-colonial black feminism. Each night, only a

quarter of the audience left the studio during intermission, the rest remaining to hear the Baron's lengthy descriptions of her macerated anatomy. Like the need to flaunt and ponder sexualized images such as Josephine Baker, Kim Kardashian or Miley Cyrus, we are reminded how the South African Venus truly has become a symbolic Goddess for all sexualized female icons, not only black. It is not for better or for worse; it is as subjective as the object itself, each individual given a choice as to how they view her exploitive nature. Purposefully leaving that question open to interpretation in these showings dispelled any feelings of blame or praise.

To amplify the notion of black female lineage, I added two characters known as the Venus Chorus who signified orbiting bonds of sisterhood, protecting The Venus throughout time in the piece. The Venus Chorus left audiences enlightened rather than alienated, as was my fervent hope. One observer expressed her thoughts about the Venus Chorus as such: "At first I wasn't sure why they were there, but as they began to underline and embody Venus' emotions I began to really enjoy them. It heightened the connection to that specific character for me" (Muldoon). Another explained them in this manner: "They struck me as a visual (and audible) representation of Venus' internal feelings - very much a direct line to her emotions - no greater thought or planning or long-term but very much in that moment id/instinct/reaction. They painted a picture of a lively internal life, and seemed to me to be her passions and desires and sadness laid out for us to share in, and that's what they were - a way for us to further share in this character" (Robinson). If I were to do it differently, I would have this Chorus more active in the first act, as most audiences genuinely appreciated the theatrical nature of their second act presence.

It is difficult to say what I would alter in terms of the overall process should I direct this show again, since my original intentions were radically thwarted already. The director Richard

Foreman's statement that he would have the courage to make it stranger than it was if directing *Venus* again (Kalb), was certainly the direction I was forced into. Courage from everyone involved in this production resulted in the leap of faith needed to make this play truly soar. Directing it again, I would do the fully mounted production on the intended stage, as a comparative to how relevant our studio showings were in terms of affecting audiences. The larger show may have lost some of the intimacy and clarity that I so relished with each run-through we had in the rehearsal space. As Philip Akin, Artistic Director of Toronto's Obsidian Theatre Company, wrote me after seeing opening night, "Your work was very good. The story clear, actors focused and a strongly defined arc." On the other hand, I also believe that the numerous meetings with designers had addressed the intimacy problem from the start, and we had created a space that drew audiences into our close-up world, despite the potential vacuum of a 360-seat auditorium. If there was any flaw in the design, it was in some of the staging where audiences would not be able to see over some actors' heads downstage; thus *The Venus*' view was often obstructed atop her six-foot pedestal upstage. This problem was easily solved during the three sudden rehearsal days we had on the actual set by adjusting the downstage actors to either stage right or stage left depending on the scenario. Subsequently, it transferred beautifully into the studio space, audiences never obstructed from viewing the entire stage picture. Minor alterations were constantly being made leading up to the eventual form presented, every actor and spectator haplessly allowed to indulge in the love of this show counting down from Overture to its Scene One closure.

This *Venus* was a show about choices and love. This did not alter my premise, but certainly highlighted the multi-faceted nature of theatre. My opening night speech to the cast was to make bold choices and maintain love for each other no matter any prejudice harbored amongst

the group. This was a team sport and we all had to be in it fully or else we were doomed to fail. The production team was equally unified and encouraged to carry their momentum forward. Dismantling the set, reimagining the story for another dimension, stripping away spike tape during each showing, and completing costumes, lights, sound and props with no eventual use for production, all showed the determination we as theatre artists embody when we see things through to the end. My director's challenges resulted in an entire collaborative need to triumph in the face of adversity. We were not deterred. The Venus Hottentot may indeed have been dead and there may not have been a show any night, but the life of the theatre will carry on somewhere and somehow, every single night of existence. This unforgettable experience will be talked about for many years to come, the legacy of Saartjie Baartman truly put to rest in her theatrical grave.

Notes

1. The correct pronunciation is “Saar-key” rolling the *r*. See Holmes xiii.
2. It exists today as the central hub of this area, six-story tall buildings jutting out in six directions. For the exact location at 225 Piccadilly, see Holmes 6.
3. The apartment when I viewed it now stands above “Babylone” jewelry store and the “Macéo” private dining restaurant. For the exact address as it exists today at 15 Rue des Petits Champs, see Holmes 74.
4. The iconic 1748 novel, *Fanny Hill*, by British writer John Cleland set the standardized image for Eurocentric women in pornography, being republished at least thirteen times between 1800 and 1850. See Sigel 28.
5. The extensive process of extracting all the facts and questions from the text is found in Katie Mitchell’s book, *The Director’s Craft*.

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