

Howard University

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**Dramaturge Notes – Breath Boom
by Kia Corthron**

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Dramaturge Notes – Breath Boom

Breath Boom is not a play about female gang members, it's a play about people. Human beings just figuring out how to live. How to survive. How to succeed based on the rules of the game they've inherited.

Kia Corthron has crafted a fictional world sharing with us many of the social dynamics that have shaped these women and how they both succeed and fail at balancing their multi-layered identities -- pseudo-sisters, daughters, girlfriends, mothers, friends, lovers, victims, takers. We watch as they navigate both physical and mental survival. We cringe, we question, we laugh and we cry because their human-ness is our own. As we watch and experience the harsh life these women lead we may even mutter to ourselves "But by the grace of God, there go I."

Impacted by social ills such as domestic violence, molestation, racial profiling and poverty, the young women and their caretakers have been conditioned to become auto bots functioning on automatic pilot as they react to the same-shit-different-day world they live in.

I think Corthron wants us to remember that beneath the veneer of planning, plotting and posturing, the women who inhabit this story are more like us than different from us. At the end of the day they want to belong and be loved. They want to own their lives.

There are many themes to be explored in the play, however, for me two key words resonates throughout: Inheritance and choice.

In the first half of the play we witness the dysfunctional and destructive environment the women have inherited and how that environment has shaped the choices they have made and as a result who they have become. One of the most significant moments in the play that reflects the theme of inheritance is in Act 1 Scene 3 when Angel is creating her scrap book filled with mementoes of young people who were killed/murdered. Scrap books are about legacy. They are typically created as memory keepers for those left behind, sending a message to anyone reading it of: This is who I/We were. In the larger world of the play Angels rather 'morbid' scrap book will exist and bear witness to the communities inheritance.

As our main character, Prix, travels through time in the play from 16-30, she grows in her awareness of inheritance and choices but her sense of accountability and self-responsibility doesn't assert its presence until the end of the play.

In Act 1 Scene 4 Corthron introduces the theme of choices along with re-inserting inheritance. She has Prix write an intensely aware and compassionate letter supposedly to be read at her next counseling session. In the letter Prix articulates an awareness of how the life circumstances she's inherited have impacted her

and the resulting choices she's made. She ends the letter stating that she welcomes a replenished soul. Although in the world of the play Prix laughs at and jokes on her expression of self awareness and compassion Corthron uses this moment to introduce Prix's growing awareness of inheritance and choice.

Shuttling forward to the plays ending, Corthron brings the theme of inheritance and choice full circle with a scene between Prix and her mother. The symbolism of the powerful energy of the mother daughter relationship creates a moment where a now 30 year old Prix decides to choose awareness of self, awareness of others and self-responsibility. Early in the scene she tells her mother she is too old to gang bang or she's outgrown it. She now rejects the violent ways of reacting/choosing from her past and has chosen to get out. Further in the scene, when her mother pleads with her to do something that would please her (make her a pipe cleaner firework sculpture) Prix finally recognizes that her mother is a fellow human being and tells her mother "Yes." This choice signifies a new beginning. Not a perfect world of doing all the right things, but quite possibly a new way of thinking which is the necessary pre-requisite for living well no matter what circumstances life brings your way.

The play's title, Breath Boom, provides another metaphoric entrance point. Breath is something which we cannot live without. No breath, no life. Breath can be viewed as "life itself" The boom could be seen as the climactic BOOM of the fireworks that fascinate Prix and serve as her means of mental escape. However, in Act 1 Scene 5 the text gives further insight to what lies beneath the boom. Prix is sharing her thoughts comparing music to fireworks and she says that when fireworks go off we all hold our breaths and how her heart booms during the final moment of the final bang; then calm is all that's left. There is life (Breath) and then there is death (Boom). Life is brilliant, vivid, awe inspiring and it is also as short as fireworks shooting on any given day.

After discussion with the Director for this production, Danielle Drakes, I recognize the multi-layered significance of her directorial concept centered on "the Urban Jungle Gym":

Urban Jungle Gym -

Swinging in on steel pipes.

Fast moves on concrete and double takes through chain links, taking names.

Hanging high but taking sides.

Hanging low and taking lives.

~ *Danielle Drakes*

Animals caged and held in captivity like Zoos don't really like it. They run, fly and climb intent upon escape. They fight back without giving any clues that they're about to and we are wise to heed the signs "Don't go near the animals."

From 1986 to 2000, the corner of the Bronx that the women of *Breath Boom* inhabit is reminiscent of the animal living in captivity. The women are forced to figure out how to live, how to adapt and how to survive while existing in an animalistic environment that oftentimes produces an animalistic mindset covering the person locked inside.

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