spell #7 and Ntozake Shange’s Project of Anti-Drama

Robert Lublin, University of Massachusetts Boston

Available at: https://works.bepress.com/robert_lublin/7/
spell #7 and Ntozake Shange's Project of Anti-Drama

Robert L. Lublin

Two important and often noted aspects of Ntozake Shange's dramatic writing are her refusal to call her work "plays" and her consistent unwillingness to consider herself a playwright. This predilection goes back to her first published work, *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf*, for which Shange created the genre "choreopoem." In coining this neologism, Shange succeeded both in distinguishing her work from what is more easily termed a play and in providing a name for her radically new style of dramatic writing. Shange offers the reason for this decision in the preface to her book *three pieces*:

... as a poet in American theater, I find most activity that takes place on our stages overwhelmingly shallow, stilted, and formulaic. That is probably one of the reasons I insist on calling myself a poet or writer, rather than a playwright. I am interested in the poetry of a moment; the emotional/aesthetic impact of a character or a line.

Reacting against the banal forms of drama she found proliferating in the American theater at the time, Shange created what amounts to a new form of art. The choreopoem has been roughly defined as a distinctively African-American art form that combines poetry, prose, song, dance, and music to arouse an emotional response in an audience.

For her second published work,* spell #7*, Shange once again employed the distinctive dramatic technique that she created in *for colored girls*, only this time, Shange did not call her work a choreopoem. Rather she labeled *spell #7* "A THEATER PIECE," even though it clearly uses the same creative and stylistic approach that made the earlier work a success. In general, this change in designation has not garnered much attention, being either ignored or looked upon as merely another instance of Shange distancing her work from what she patronizingly calls plays. However, such conclusions may be over-hasty since the title "theater piece" lends itself to a plurality of meaning and intimates greater significance than it has thus far been critically accorded.

Certainly the term "theater piece" serves to separate Shange's work from that of other dramatic writers. However, it also highlights the fact that, unlike *for colored girls*, *spell #7* which was originally written to be produced on the stage—the earlier work was first a series of poems which were ultimately linked into a single performance. Finally, the designation "theater piece" suggests not merely that the work at hand is intended for production (a piece written for the
The minstrel mask, a sign of white domination in the field of entertainment, compels the audience to face the mask and unmask the face underneath the mask. The face underneath the mask of blackface is always already white, in the sense that minstrelsy is a white male tradition, a white disgrace, a white issue. Minstrel shows reveal nothing whatsoever about African Americans.8

Indeed, even the dialect in minstrel shows did not belong to African Americans, and the songs employed actually derive from English traditions.9 This absence of the black man in minstrel shows explains why even the black performers who later took part in minstrels had to blacken their faces to take part. They were not performing black identity, but rather performing its denigration.

Consequently, Shange uses this absence as the starting point of her theater piece. The first character to come onto the stage enters alone donning a blackface mask and wearing the tuxedo of a traditional minstrel show interlocutor. Beginning with a brief minstrel-like song, this character, Lou, seems to be a genuine remnant of the outdated theater form. The characters that follow him onto the stage, however, do not so easily fit the expectations of the genre. Although they too enter donning blackface masks, rather than tuxedos, they are instructed in the line notes to wear “uttered fieldhand garb.” In these outfits, as they were worn in the original production of spell #7, the actors’ arms are clearly visible and clearly belong to black actors. This runs counter to the demands of the minstrel form which requires that those under the mask be white (even in those instances when they are not). In this manner, Shange begins to disturb the absence that defines minstrelsy by subtly intersecting the presence of genuine black identity; the black bodies dressed in slaves’ clothes “speak” from behind silent masks and begin to make audible a history of silence.

Starting with this complication, the integrity of Shange’s minstrel performance begins to crack and onto her stage comes something that would never be seen in minstrelsy; genuine black performance traditions, the very ones that were marginalized and excluded in the course of popularizing the minstrel show. Shange states in the line notes of her work:

...the company which had been absolutely still till this moment jumps up, with a rhythm set on a washboard carried by one of them, they begin a series of steps that identify every period of afro-american entertainment: from acrobats, comedians, tap-dancers, calindry dancers, cotton club choruses, apollo theater du-wop groups...9

Shange’s anti-drama rejects the minstrel show, opting instead to validate black’s creative contributions to an American history and culture that deem these experiences insignificant.1 Yet once it has been established that the theater will permit the presentation of genuine African American art, the actors begin to remove their masks, all of the actors are black. Shange provides an explanation for her choice of an all-black cast in a 1977 interview. She said, “I won’t ever write a part for
a white person. They already own the theaters, so let them do it. I'll do my waiting for black actors.” In 1985 she reiterated this stance saying, “I want to make sure that I have absolutely irresistible characters, all of whom are black. I will be giving no voice to white people. They have a lot of writers. They can write their own stories.” In Shange’s theater, the white characters and actors that usually populate the American stage are absent. Here, the margins occupy the center and that which has traditionally held the center is banished to the margins. As a result, the stage of spell #7 deserves consideration as a distinctively black space.

The first thing that serves to define this “black space” as it exists in spell #7 is the fact that it is conducive to black magic. This makes perfect sense in a work with the subtitle geechee jibara quit magic trance manual for technologically stressed third world people. Magic enters the performance with the first minstrel actor who admits to being a magician. Actually, he admits to being the son of a magician; his father retired from magic when a black child in the third grade asked to be made white. Consequently, the son picked up the father’s trade and now he is the spell caster: “everything i do is magic these days & it’s very colored/ very now you see it/ now you don’t mess wit me.” On Shange’s stage, the possibility of magic exists, but the thought of wanting to be white must be banished. The painful implication is that the desire to be white prefigures among African Americans outside of Shange’s stage, in the nominal world that she excludes from spell #7. In his brief monologue, Shange’s magician establishes the challenge set before both himself and the playwright: the desire to be white must be collapsed in favor of the greater joy that can be felt in being black.

aint no colored magician in his right mind
gonna make you white
i mean
this is blk magic
you lookin at
& i’m fixin you up good/ fixin you up good & colored
& you gonna be colored all yr life
& you gonna love it/ bein colored/ all yr life/ colored & love it
love it/ bein colored. SPELL #7!

Shange’s anti-drama sets out as its project the magical evocation of black joy against a history that excludes its possibility. This contrast between a history of exclusion and pain and the promise of joy informs the totality of spell #7.

The inspiration for this contrast may come from the very personal experience that Ntozake Shange had with racial exclusion and pain when, at age eight, she was placed in an all-white school. A child of Brown vs. the Board of Education, Shange grew up in a school where she was continually berated and harassed: “With kids there are no pretensions and they can be very hurtful.” As a result of the pain she has felt as a consequence of being black, Shange creates of spell #7 a place where the past can simultaneously be remembered and inverted. Thus, Lou delivers a monologue in which he references integration: “be a blk kid in

195/ who’s not blk enuf to lovingly ignore/ not beautiful enuf to leave alone/
not smart enuf to move outta the way/ not bitter enuf to die at an early age” (9). However, shortly after this painful memory of racial integration, the magic of spell #7 transforms the theater into a space entirely devoted to black experience with no mediating white voice granted entrance to lessen its significance.

For this transformation, the lights come up to reveal the rest of the stage of spell #7, which ends up being the interior of a lower Manhattan bar. In light of the promises made in the prologue, the mundane setting at first seems shocking in its apparent triviality. However, the simplicity of the setting is immediately belied by the language used to define it. Eli says:

[his isl MY kingdom,
there shall be no trespassers/ no marauders
no tourists in my land
you nurture these gardens or be shot on sight
carelessness & other priorities
are not permitted within these walls
i am mantling an array of strength & beauty
no one shall interfere with this
the construction of myself
my city
my theater
my bar

come to my poems
but understand we speak english carefully
& perfect antillean french]

With these words and the rest of his monologue, Eli constitutes the simple bar, and by extension, the stage and, by further extension, the entire theater as a magical black space. The effect is heightened by the fact that, throughout Eli’s recitation, the other members of the cast dance to the music of “We Are Family” by Sister Sledge. Taken together, the music, dance, and poetry construct the actors and those in the audience into a black community.

An essential aspect of this community is the manner in which it communicates with itself. As Eli says, “we speak english carefully.” Shange’s anti-drama is equally devoted to speaking words that are seldom heard as it is to staging bodies that are seldom seen. Her relationship with the English language is vexed, however, which she has frequently discussed in her own work and in interviews. In the preface to three works, she writes, “i can’t count the number of times i have viscerally wanted to attack deform m main the language i was taught to hate myself in the language that perpetuates the notions that cause pain to every black child as he/ she learns to speak of the world & the self.” Recognizing the colonial potential of language to establish and maintain hegemonic power structures, Shange refuses to confine herself to white English. Rather, her characters speak in a manner that foregrounds their black identity. In writing this form of dialogue for her characters, Shange allies her work with what Frantz Fanon calls “combat breath”:

...
There is no occupation of territory, on the one hand, and independence of persons on the other. It is the country as a whole, its history, its daily pulsation that are contested, disfigured, in the hope of final destruction. Under this condition, the individual’s breathing is an observed, an occupied breathing. It is a combat breathing.\(^3\)

Combat breath defines the language one speaks when resisting the domination of an oppressive society while living within its borders. It is the refusal to be silent in a culture that seeks to deny one a voice.

Attempting to embrace the complexity inherent to combat breath, Shange does not limit the concept to mean that her characters must speak “Black English” to affirm their identities. Rather, she endorses an expansive definition of the term and actually pokes fun at the assumption that African Americans are incapable of speaking “proper English.” Shange’s complex understanding of combat breath most clearly emerges in the discussion held in the bar after some of the actors have returned from an audition with a foreign director who was impressed by their ability to speak English clearly and asked them where they learned to do so.

lily: all i did was say “born da/ comvo vai”/ and the englishman got red in the face
lou (as the englishman): yr from the states/ aren’t you?
lily: “sim”/ i said/ in good portuguese
lou: but you speak portuguese
lily: “sim” i said/ in good portuguese
lou: how did you pick that up?
lily: i had a answer so simple/ i cndt say i learned it/ cuz niggahs cant learn & that wda been too hard on the man/ so i said/ in good english/ i held my ear to the ground & listened to the samba from b’lim\(^3\)

Shange’s characters speak “Black English” at some points in the work and “proper English” at others, but they are not confined to either. Indeed, their ability to communicate transcends language barriers and succeeds in confounding the English director who is himself confined by society’s preconception of blacks and who thus cannot understand the actual men and women with whom he speaks.\(^3\) Despite the fun the actors have discussing the director who cannot fathom educated blacks, it is clear that the stakes in such a game are high.

The poignancy of this scene becomes clear when it is contrasted with the realities of the American theater institution. As other scenes in spell #7 make clear, jobs for blacks in the American theater are rare and frequently degrading, predominantly consisting of such roles as prostitute and drug dealer. Alec reminds the other actors at the bar that they drink because “if you didn’t drink you wd remember that you’re not workin.”\(^3\) and Bettina, who has a job, says “if that director asks me to play it any blacker/ i’m gonna have to do it in a mummy dress.”\(^3\) As a consequence of this reality, in Shange’s theater piece, it is these characters who make up the core of the action. The spell #7 stage does not present the white actors for whom so many plays are written but presents the actual lived experience of trained black performers and the frustration they experience as their talents lay wasted.

This is the nature of Shange’s anti-drama. What we find on the spell #7 stage reflects precisely what Shange found outside of the stage of American theater: disenchanted, disenfranchised black actors. At first glance, a lower Manhattan bar and the frustrated men and women who frequented it might not seem like exciting material upon which to base one’s dramatic work, but Shange is devoted to telling the stories that are not being told and does it with such skill that audiences want to know about these people whom it has never seen represented.

She explains in a 1983 interview:

I write about things that I know have never been given their full due. I have to do that. These are the moments in life that are important to me. I want people to at least understand or have the chance to see that this is a person whose life is not only valid but whose life is valiant.\(^3\)

Howeover, not all of Shange’s stories have met with positive responses. While spell #7 was initially received with mostly favorable reviews, a few of its scenes stood out as particularly strident or out of place on the American stage. The one which garnered the most negative attention was the story of a woman named sue jean as told by alec and embodied by natalie. David Gelman, in a review titled “This Time Shange Cuts No Spell,” described sue jean’s story as “an especially harrowing recitation . . . about a woman who contrives to have a baby she names ‘Myself,’ [sic] then murders it once it begins to grow.”\(^3\) Marilyn Stasio, in a mixed review of the show, noted that among its weaknesses were “poems that are more didactic than dramatic, including . . . a psychologically murky one about infanticide.”\(^3\)

The fact that sue jean’s story was singled out by critics is not surprising for its protagonist boldly defies most conventions of social respectability. sue jean is first described by alec as a woman who “had always wanted a baby/ never a family/ never a man.”\(^3\) With this introduction, sue jean already stands outside the realm of social norms; after all, twenty years after spell #7 opened, unwed child-rearing remains a questionable subject. Additionally, sue jean does not subscribe to social expectations of probity or decency in any other area of her life. Her regular environment is a bar where she sits “with her legs straddled & revealin red lace pants/ & lil hair smashed under the stockings.”\(^3\) She has no friends save the bartender ray with whom she talks while drinking. At the time of spell #7’s initial performance, sue jean’s appropriateness as the subject of drama must have seemed dubious, particularly in a black drama whose aim, one might have assumed, was to provide positive images of blacks. Nevertheless, she has a significant section of Shange’s theater piece devoted to her experience.
Eager to have her child, Sue Jean has sex with Ray right there in the bar. Their encounter is one absolutely devoid of emotional attachment, involving no tenderness or affection. Natalie, telling the story of Sue Jean, says “Ray wanted to kiss me, but I screamed ‘Cuz I didn’t like kissing only fucking’.” Once she is pregnant with her child, however, Sue Jean completely alters her life in order to care for it, and when her son is born, she names him “myself” and stays with him at all times. But when the child starts to crawl and discover the world on its own, Sue Jean feels its separation keenly. “I wanted the milk back... & the tight gourd of a stomach I had when myself was bein’ in me.” As a result, she slips the boys wrists and drinks the blood in a desperate attempt to embody her own creation once again.

The disturbing nature of this story of moral depravity, emotionless sex, and infanticide explains why it received the reactions it did from critics. As an element of anti-drama, however, Sue Jean’s story is perhaps the most significant one in Spell #7 for it makes manifest a story whose absence has been so widely accepted that making it visible requires an incendiary dramatic statement. The presence of Sue Jean’s story manifests a black women’s identity in a world that dominates African Americans through an ideology of racism and women through a process of patriarchy. In Sue Jean’s efforts to create something for herself that exists outside the tenets of both of these oppressive systems, Sandra Richards allies her with the concept of the “contrary black woman.” This identity position is defined by one’s unwillingness to disappear amidst the social norms of a racist and sexist system. However, since it is this system that establishes what constitutes the social norm, the words or acts of the contrary black woman are likely to appear hopeless, ineffective, desperate, or insane.

Sue Jean is a black woman whose only contribution to the world is her child. Consequently, when her child, a son, starts to crawl and begins developing an identity that will separate him from his mother, she has to try and subsume it back into her being. She has nothing else to connect her materially to the society in which she lives. The pervasiveness of the black woman’s silence explains the shattering power of Sue Jean’s story when it is given voice. Thus it seems understandable that critics responded viscerally or negatively to Sue Jean’s story. The only problem would have been if they did not respond at all.

Evoking a response to previously silent characters and previously absent identity positions is at the heart of Shange’s anti-drama. Additionally, it is a project that has remained close to her purpose as a poet. In a 1987 interview, Shange noted that, “unless black women are writing the pieces, we’re being left out in the same way we used to be left out of literature. We don’t appear in things unless we write them ourselves.” In Spell #7, Shange creates an anti-drama that works to reverse the silencing tradition of American theatrical history and give voice to the experiences of African Americans.

Notes

3. It should be noted that a photograph: lovers in motion (1977) and boogie woogie landscapes (1978) were performed before Spell #7 (1979) but appear after it in three pieces.
5. Tom Stoppard, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 28. Referencing a white English playwright, as I do here, carries with it the risk of circumscribing Shange’s methods within hegemonic creative patterns. It is my hope that I am, instead, showing Shange’s ability to engage an extraordinary range of creative possibilities in the pursuit of her particular aesthetic and political goals. For another consideration of such self-reflexive African American theatricality, see Mike Sell, “[Ed.] Bullins as Editorial Performer: Textual Power and the Limits of Performance in the Black Arts Movement,” Theatre Journal 53.3 (2001): 411-28.
7. Although T. D. Rice (1806-60) is often credited with the creation of minstrelsy and for the purposes of this paper is named here, many people are responsible for its development and proliferation. See Robert Toll, chapter 2.
10. Shange, 9.
11. Lester, 84.
12. Quoted in Lester, 110.
13. Ibid.
14. [For a detailed study of the subtitle,] see Pinkney, 12-3.
15. Shange, 8.
17. Shange, 9.
18. Shange, 12.
19. Shange, xii.
20. Quoted in Shange, xi.
22. As a consequence of her distrust of English, Shange considered writing in other languages or perhaps mixing the languages in which she wrote. For a period of about eight months, she took journal notes randomly in English, French,
and Portuguese but ultimately decided against using such a strategy in her dramatic works since few people would be able to understand them. Claudia Tate, ed., *Black Writers at Work* (New York: Continuum, 1983), 165.

2Shange, 13.
3Shange, 14.
4Tate, 156.

7Shange, 28.
8Thad.
9Thad.
10Shange, 31.


Dr. Robert L. Lublin is on the faculty of the Performing Arts Department at the University of Massachusetts-Boston.

---

Privileges and Printing: The Culture of Copyright in the Elizabethan Theatre

T.J. Walsh

The position of ownership and authorship of a written work varies today based upon the media and medium for which it was written. Copyright is a constant today in that, by law, the moment a work is composed by a writer that composition is fully protected by United States copyright law. However, copyright, in the United States is property, it is a commodity, i.e., it is saleable. And so a writer of a work may sell the copyright to a buyer and in so doing give up all rights to the written work. This type of transaction is the usual business practice in the film industry. A film studio, by practice, will not purchase a screenplay from a screenwriter without the condition of "transfer of copyright": the studio will be the owner, and in effect, the author of that screenplay do with as they see fit. The studio may change, rewrite, cut or discard a work once it is purchased from the original writer because by contract the studio is now the author and owner of the work. In stark contrast to the film industry standard, the position of a playwright in the theatre in the United States is that of an author and owners of his or her work. Due to the work of the American Dramatists Guild in the early 20th Century, by contract, no person may change a word of a play without the author's consent and the playwright has final say on the hiring of actors, directors and designers. In effect, the playwright is owner and author of his or her work. In my evolving study of the history and theory of authorship (with emphasis on the position of the playwright), I'm finding that these two opposing ideas of the roles and rights of an author, briefly stated above, are on a collision course in the 21st Century. In order to understand where copyright and authorship are heading, this study looks to the origins and conditions of early copyright law.

The modern theory of copyright, that is, copyright as the right of an author to ownership of his own work, would have been a very foreign idea to Elizabethan English authors. In fact, the term "copyright" was not used during the English Renaissance and did not turn up in a legal British document until 1701 and wasn't officially put into law until 1710 in the Statute of Anne and even then the law was ambiguous and muddy (Patterson 4-5). At the time of Shakespeare, there was no "right of ownership" as we understand it today, rather the legal ability to reproduce and print a written work were privileges granted by the sovereign of the sole right to reproduce specific works, and which were...