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Rashid Johnson on Staging LeRoi Jones in the Age of Amiri Baraka

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A scene from Johnson's production of "Dutchman" for Performa 2013



The visual artist Rashid Johnson is trying his hand at theater for Performa 13 with an adaptation of the 1964 play "The Dutchman" by LeRoi Jones — now Amiri Baraka — which he's staging at the Russian & Turkish Baths in New York's East Village. Performances began Monday and will continue with five more productions through November 22. The play is essentially a dialogue, one that becomes increasingly charged and antagonistic, between a young black man and a young white woman who meet in a subway car as the man is on his way to a party. Johnson's paintings, sculpture, and video employ everyday materials like shea butter and books by black intellectuals to explore the black experience through the objects

that signify it, and the play can be viewed as an extension of that investigation. ARTINFO spoke to Johnson, who was in Zurich, Switzerland, about the challenge of working with actors ("like pieces of clay"),

perceptions of the black middle class, and how dancing with Jay Z helped him convince the bath house owners to let him stage his play.

Why did you choose this work for your first performance?

I've been interested in LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka's work for quite a while. My first introduction to LeRoi Jones was when my mother used to read me the Dead Lecturer poems when I was a kid. I actually named my first New York exhibition at Nicole Klagsbrun in 2008 after that book of poems.

How did this production come into being?

I started rereading "The Dutchman" — I kind of just pulled it off the shelf. A lot of the earlier stage notes describe this hot steamy subway. Immediately, my head went to the bath house. Quite quickly that marriage was born for me.

It was an idea I had for a few years, I just didn't have the opportunity to stage it until Performa came to me. Once, I saw RoseLee [Goldberg, Performa's founding director,] out, and said I have this thing that I was thinking about, and if you're ever interested feel free to reach out to me.

The play seemed like a faithful adaptation of the original text. Did you tweak it at all?

Zero. I did not change a single word. I didn't find it to be my place to change anything about it. There was some talk that I would change the language to suit the venue. But I just didn't think that that was necessary. I think there are already so many complex things that happen, that testify to the complexity of negotiating your relationship to the rooms and the heat while simultaneously trying to take in the language.

What are your thoughts on staging it for today's audience? It feels very rooted in the 1960s Civil Rights era.

Strangely enough, it feels like it lives really appropriately today, as opposed to the way we would have [experienced] it in '64. I say that because I think the way that we imagine the struggle of the hero or anti-hero character is more married [than it would have been then] to our understanding of the civil rights movement, meaning things like the March on Washington.

Maybe I'm only speaking for myself, but I think I speak for quite a few people when I say the way we learned about 1964, from the black character's perspective, in most history courses growing up [which had to do with] that Southern moment, that four-little-girls moment, that Selma moment, that MLK moment, that Malcolm X moment — more than [with] this black middle class kid from New Jersey on his way to a party kind of having his blackness called into question, rather than struggling or fighting to find his liberty. So I was really interested in that narrative, in imagining that black middle class character that I think we have a much stronger hold on today, when our president really comes from not a totally dissimilar background. I think our familiarity with that character speaks to how we are able to imagine or define the complexity of the black character today.

I know that your background was also middle class, and as far as I know Amiri Baraka believed that black middle class artists tended toward mediocrity because they weren't part of a struggle.

Right. You have that designation with Baraka and the transition from writing "The Dutchman" to overt black nationalism, and I think that's an interesting set of questions — the black middle class having this almost bourgeois sensibility, it doesn't suggest a struggle, but it's a struggle that I think a lot of black artists continue to focus on today. Because there's this feeling of maybe needing to validate yourself through a struggle or a radicalism, rather than focus on what someone might call "Negro Exceptionalism." That kind of bourgeois character becomes derogatively the Uncle Tom. [I'm interested in] the opportunity to consider locating yourself between the narrative of struggle and the narrative of Negro Exceptionalism.

Do you find yourself falling to one side of that struggle?

It's one that I'm basically negotiating. I'm trying to speak clearly from my location. There's this great quote by Aaron McGruder, who wrote [and drew] "The Boondocks": "Why is it that all black people think they were chased by dogs and sprayed by hoses?" That was a small portion of the population that had that specific experience. When our experiences become monolithic, I find it difficult to believe the authors.

In my work [I've] always attempted to live in my actual experience while being conscious of a historical discourse that has had an effect on me. If I had it resolved I think I wouldn't be making anything interesting.

Can you give me an example of one thing you had to coach one of your actors on?

Dealing with actors is incredibly complex, because they oftentimes are like pieces of clay. They want to be told how you want it done. You have to then decide if you want to be the teller or if you want to give them agency. I don't know how others do this; I think my naiveté and my lack of training in the theater led me more to giving them agency. You have to tell them that they have the agency and that you'll participate with the materials that they bring you.

Were there any parts of the production that were particularly challenging?

I think it was difficult at times for Tory Ernst, who plays Lula, because there was a lot of language there that has probably not come out of her mouth before. For a white woman who's twenty-two to say "nigger" is probably very difficult. And to be such a problematic character and such an unpleasant character, although very entertaining, I think was a challenge that she and I both faced. Me as the director, hearing her say such difficult things to hear, and her as a protagonist having to say them.

Did you get any guidance from RoseLee Goldberg or other theater directors?

I avoided established theater people because I didn't want to be handicapped by their training. But RoseLee, who obviously has quite a bit of experience in the performance world, came in at different stages to participate, watch rehearsals, and give feedback. I got some notes from RoseLee and Adrienne [Edwards, the curator of the performance]. They helped me consider the aspect of flow, and also helped me deal with issues of tolerance — the larger logistical aspects of how the play travels through the space.

You said you got the idea for the bath house when you reread the play. How were you aware of it to begin with?

I started [going] in grad school. I was going through a divorce and I had a lot of reading I was doing, and I developed what was probably a serious anxiety problem — because I was about as poor as you can get, in graduate school, and trying to make my work and keep my head above water.

I was sitting around with an artist friend, and I said I'm really having trouble dealing with all this anxiety and loads of reading. He suggested that I try this Russian-Turkish bath house. He would take half a Xanax and go sit in the place. I said, 'If it works for you, I'm going to try it myself.' And I Xeroxed a bunch of what I was reading, which was probably Derrida, and I became part of the culture there, the character sitting in a corner *schvitzing* and reading. It became a place that I could both get away to and do the reading I needed to do and find an opportunity to collect myself.

It's kind of an important place in my growth. Both intellectually and emotionally. I think a lot of people imagine it as being this posh experience, with cucumbers over your eyes. It's really not. All types go, from the 1% to the bottom of the percentage pool. It's all-welcoming. There's not a whole lot of opportunity to judge when everyone's disrobed.

How did the owners of the Russian & Turkish Baths take to the idea?

I think they were fairly skeptical. The owners are basketball fans and I sit with a friend at the Nets game, and he has tickets on the floor, and they saw me sitting on the floor, so I think they thought I was somebody. I did that Jay-Z thing [the performance with Marina Abramovic at Pace gallery where Johnson shadow-boxed with Jay Z], and they'd seen that. They got it in their heads that I was, I don't know, a valuable cultural producer.