

Interview by Ashley Cook

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Last week Runner Magazine published the play *Is It Morning Yet?* by will street. The play frames a moment with two holiday bell ringers working for an LGBTQ organization. It's a frigid day, which is complimented by the tumultuous relationship between the two main characters, who were surprised with each other's presence at the beginning of the script after not having seen or even spoken to each other in over a year. It becomes clear that they had an unfortunate and sudden break in their lengthy love affair and their sustained mutual love is highlighted by their anger towards one another which comes out between hints of why...

Ashley Cook: So the reason I wanted to have this interview with you was to get some more information about you as a writer, your influences and other things about your practice that can help with unpacking your play *Is it Morning Yet?* that was published by Runner Magazine last week.

In reading this play initially, I felt that it was well written and engaging. At the end of the play, I was slightly startled because of the violence that ensued. Of course, I understand the reason why it ended that way, but I am wondering if you can share your thoughts on the incorporation of violence in your work and touch on some of your influences that may have inspired you to do so?

will street: Yes, as I have been developing my work as a writer, I would say I have been looking at Amiri Baraka, August Wilson, Lorraine Handsbury and other writers who work along the same line. I think that one of the common threads that brings all of these artists into the same tapestry is that there was really no desire to coddle. Part of this was because they wanted to hold themselves accountable as writers and they wanted to hold the audience accountable as well.

I am reminded of Amiri Baraka's play *The Dutchman*. It's about this Black dude who gets on a train with a white woman and they have this crazy back and forth. There is sorta romance but there is also violence between them and it ends with the white woman killing the Black character. Now, I am in an inter-racial relationship so I could care less about that kind of thing, but the point of view that Amiri Baraka was com-

ing from was a little more metal. In order for the audience to really get it, he felt the need to really show the life and death nature of a lot of what oppressed groups go through. For instance, getting called a nigger or even a faggot immediately triggers the fight or flight response in us that we only feel if we are in deadly danger and I feel that to put the audience in that space encourages them to really feel the visceral effects of experiences like that.

Similarly, Troy died in *Fences*, August Wilson's most famous show. And although there are no deaths in *A Raisin in the Sun* by Handsbury, it's still a matter of "what are these people going to be?" Like, are they going to be put out on the streets because of racism or x, y and z...I guess I can attest to that as the reason why I illustrate my character's trials and tribulations the way I did.

A: Yeah, I feel like allowing yourself as an artist and writer to be really raw is almost like, well, it feels like the only way. Because why else are you creating it? It's the way to forward the trajectory of expression, you know? Because you can make work and be an artist who remains within a bubble that is more digestible to the general public, and that role comes with a clearer, more careful career path. But those kinds of artists are not necessarily the ones who are pushing the boundaries.

w: Exactly. It's like are you actually doing it for the love of the game or are you doing it for status...All of the greatest writers that I think about, the Shakespeares of the world, the Chekhovs of the world, their story was fucked up until they made it, and even after they made it a lot of times. As artists, we have the guts to dedicate a lifetime to this shaky promise of having our work discovered and it is so nice when our urgency and desperation comes out in the work.

A: I think that people who have never really tasted the depths of how far creative expression can go don't even know that it exists; like they have never seen that color before or they have never tasted that taste before. And when they do, they may be startled, surprised or even scared, but then later in reflection realize it is important to be exposed to these more intense facets of reality. There is a phrase in art history along the lines of "in order to be a saint in the art world, you must have been a sinner" meaning that the most radical ones are the ones who are remembered; many of the most important artists throughout history were considered degenerates in their time and had many challenges that they faced throughout life.

w: Yes. I mean August Wilson had 5 wives. Throughout college, I wasn't necessarily the most saintly. I had substance abuse issues. These trials and tribulations are pretty necessary; I believe that my mental illness is the cause of why I write the way I write. With depression and anxiety goggles on, it's easy to see the worst in people and yourself.

During the Covid-19 quarantine, I actually went through a pretty serious bout of depression, living with my

parents, we needed to take the shotgun out of the house, it was getting that serious. I had five tabs of LSD and I took it all and just wept to clown videos for an hour and a half. I realized in that moment that making a fool of yourself is probably the purest form of performance; it gives so much service to the audience. After that, I actually decided to drop out of college and enroll to become a clown, but then I realized that being a clown isn't that lucrative, so I just re-purposed it to explore other types of vulnerability on the stage.

Being a playwright has become important to me and I see it as a job with the most in-real-time feedback you could possibly get. I mean people could heckle you, they could walk out of your show. Even as a painter or a ceramicist, you have a little wiggle room. The audience won't hate you if you don't make a perfect bowl or painting, but if you say something wrong in your play, they can hate you.

A: After you decided that instead of being a clown that you wanted to be a playwright, is that when you started writing plays?

w: No, so I went from clown school to wanting to be a poet and so I was mostly writing poetry. It was over the summer of 2021, I was sort of flailing in the wind not knowing what I wanted to do and I hit up one of my old professors and she suggested that I write a play. At first I was unsure because I did not want to have to make up dialogue. As an alternative, she suggested that I write a play with no dialogue, so I did and that's how it started. The play with no dialogue basically looked like an essay with state directions. At the time I wrote it, I was working at a restaurant and so the play is about a guy who just got off of work and all he wants to do is smoke a bowl, but he can't find weed. He finally finds weed but he can't find a lighter and eventually finds matches and every match besides the last one doesn't work, so he is able to finally smoke weed.

A: A fairy tale ending.

w: Haha yes. And later on, I wrote a play called *Napoleon the Conqueror*. It is about a drunk who lives in a tent and it is later revealed that he dated the current president of the United States when they were in college. They had to break up in the 80s because it came out that they were gay and of course it was an issue with him being president and later I realized that that is where the intensity of my work was born. My work is pretty transparent and if you know me and you read my work you would see where I was in life based on what I was writing at that time. The intensity comes from these personal experiences and I feel that this is the first play where I used my own life as a catalyst for writing.

A: Do you feel as though your characters represent different aspects of your personality and you maybe use them while writing to learn more about yourself?

w: Yes, for instance in *Napoleon the Conqueror*, the wine-o can't trust the president because of an experience of betrayal and that is exactly what was happening in my life at the time, but I actually didn't make that connection until a year later.

Now I am in a new relationship and dealing with all these insecurities and I think that is sort of where Quinterius from *Is It Morning Yet?* comes from. I mean, he literally went to jail in order to hide that he is a failure. In a way, this situation is real for me. I don't have a degree, I am dating a really amazing person and he doesn't really judge me for certain things that I judge myself about. I feel that Quinterius is representative of the lengths that we go to hide the boiled down nature of who we are.

A: In your play, you allow your characters to become so vulnerable within such a short passage. A reader may even feel slightly voyeuristic to read the intimate exchange between your characters in this play. It is interesting to highlight how love and anger can often share the same spaces and I wonder how you see the relationship between vulnerability and passion?

w: I think that passion breeds vulnerability...sometimes. I'll give you an example. One of my favorite things to do is to talk with people who have super specific passions like wine-connoisseurs. I like to observe their facial expressions when they talk about merlot or something. There is a seriousness to it. To say "I love" something or to dedicate yourself to something is a very vulnerable place to put yourself because you could fail. It can be embarrassing to be vulnerable but I feel like the two need to co-exist because really we are only willing to be vulnerable with things that we are passionate about.

A: Yes, I can see the link between love, anger, vulnerability and passion in your work. I wonder if we are only really willing to be vulnerable once we decide or realize we love something. It seems to be a cycle of love to vulnerability to passion to anger.

w: Yes, I agree. There are so many frustrations that I experience because of what I am passionate about. In Quinterius' and Monalise's relationship, that line is a little muddy. I mean you can sorta see that Monalise's anger is coming from a place of hurt, but that is revealed much later. I think that anger is one of the purest and most primal of our emotions because it really just represents what is left of the wounded inner child, which runs so deep.

A: Do you think that you learned a lot about vulnerability from the writers you were referencing earlier?

w: Yes, absolutely. With all of those characters in situations where vulnerability is a non sequitur...the way that they set up the scenes and really plots surrounding Black men. Walter Lee in *Raisin in the Sun* is a Black man who sees all these white men with money and he is a limo driver for them so immediately he feels castrated, yet his failure comes from him not being able to say that. Instead he lashes out or goes out to go drink at 3 in the morning. Troy's inability to be vulnerable in *Fences* gets him killed; his heart attack was caused by literal heart breakage from not having an outlet to be vulnerable. In *Is It Morning Yet?*, Quinterius really only started getting the affection that he wanted from Monalise after it came out that he was lying again for what he went to jail for. It's only after he admits that he's broke that he gets what he wants.

I think generally something that I really seek to tackle is Black men's vulnerability problem. It is a holdover from slavery; if a Black man was seen crying, or heard complaining, they could have died so it's almost like that principle has been passed on ancestrally from generation to generation. Now we have more prominent Black men and boys talking about the importance of vulnerability in movies or on social media, which is helpful, but the question is still how does that look in application. I guess as a writer, I have the opportunity to explore what Black masculine vulnerability could look like in practice.

A: I am wondering if there is a certain movement that your influences work falls into and that you consider your work to be a part of or at least influenced by?

w: My work dabbles in many different movements. I think that the most consistent movement my work is concerned with is probably the Black Arts movement and the Black is Beautiful movement because some of the poets, particularly some of the feminist poets that came out of that movement give me linguistic inspiration. Audre Lorde, Nikki Giovanni, writers like that. And actually, I really look to Black feminism to guide me in my principles. I feel like their pedagogy is the most empathetic way of existence, specifically Black lesbian feminists.

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