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The Passion of Mary Cardwell Dawson by Sandra Seaton
(review)

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behind them. Sayet reminds us of those people and the countless languages lost, as English, Shakespeare's tongue, came to occupy North America.

Standing in direct contrast to the British Museum is the Tantaquidgeon Indian Museum in Uncasville, Connecticut, established by Sayet's aunt, Medicine Woman Gladys Tantaquidgeon. More of a lodge than solely a repository of Mohegan culture, the museum is a space to protect stories and lives; Sayet recalls that "it was warm and dusty and always smelled like good medicine."

Where We Belong illustrates that the playhouse also is a gathering space, an assembly of the living, in which the reclamation and transformation of stories and histories and acknowledgment in service of healing might take place. Structured around the harm done by borders, the play concludes by moving from past and present colonial violence into a future of response and responsibility, where theatre itself, as a living site of belonging and social repair might stage acts of cultural recovery. Sayet sings the final lines of the play in Mohegan: "*wigomun wig-womun wami skeetumpak, oh hai, oh hai heyuh heyuh weyuh hey.*" Those words voice a song of welcome.

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THE PASSION OF MARY CARDWELL DAWSON. By Sandra Seaton. Music selections from the repertory of the National Negro Opera Company and original music composed by Carlos Simon. Directed by Kimille Howard. The Glimmerglass Festival, Andrew J. Martin-Weber Lawn Stage, Cooperstown, New York. August 5, 2021.

In the program for *The Passion of Mary Cardwell Dawson*, playwright Sandra Seaton highlighted our culture's practice of leaving certain people's histories and contributions "unrecorded." Through this seventy-minute, one-act play with music set in a Jim Crow-era rehearsal room in 1943, Seaton sought to recognize the impact of Madame Dawson who, as founder and artistic director of the groundbreaking National Negro Opera Company (NNOC), challenged discriminatory assumptions regarding race, gender roles, and the contributions of Black Americans to the arts. As imagined by Seaton and portrayed by acclaimed mezzo-soprano Denyce Graves, *The Passion of Mary Caldwell Dawson* shows Dawson using the hours before the premier of the NNOC production of *Carmen* that she was directing to fine-tune moments within the opera with the three

NNOC members cast as Carmen, Don José, and Micaëla. Simultaneously, Dawson battles external threats to this performance (and NNOC's existence) and confronts these performers' challenges to her leadership. Throughout the play, Dawson employs narratives from her life—not to self-aggrandize, but to inspire creativity or champion freedom and equality. In doing so, Seaton transforms Dawson's history into a compelling appeal to share in her struggles.

Early on, Seaton establishes Dawson's penchant for storytelling. After entering Kimille Howard's production singing snippets from *La Traviata* referencing "freedom and joy," Dawson settled into the rehearsal room, then turned to address the audience directly. She told one story of an early childhood memory involving the spark of her love of opera, and another about experiencing discrimination when, at age 30, she finally could study opera at the New England Conservatory of Music. Dawson's onstage phone call to a performance venue's bigoted manager led into storytelling about her current challenges. We learned that for *Carmen*, she booked a floating stage on a barge anchored along the Potomac River as the site of NNOC's performance to ensure that its "multi-hued" audience could sit intermingled along the bank. With thunderstorms threatening *Carmen*'s opening performance that night, Dawson needed to renegotiate that afternoon an aberrant musicians' union contract stipulating that NNOC pay musicians hired for *Carmen*, irrespective of cancellations, which it could not afford. Breaking the contract meant ruining NNOC, since no union musicians would then play for it going forward. More immediately, however, Dawson hoped to negotiate by phone with that manager the last-minute rental of his indoor venue to host *Carmen* that evening. Unfortunately, he wanted NNOC to comply with his segregated-seating policy, which



Denyce Graves (Madame Mary Cardwell Dawson) and Mia Athey (Phoebe) in *The Passion of Mary Cardwell Dawson*. (Photo: Karli Cadell/The Glimmerglass Festival).



Mia Athey (Phoebe), Denyce Graves (Madame Mary Cardwell Dawson), Victoria Lawal (Isabelle), and Jonathan Pierce Rhodes (Frank) in *The Passion of Mary Cardwell Dawson*. (Photo: Karli Cadel/The Glimmerglass Festival.)

would require Dawson compromising her principles. By having Dawson share these particular stories, Seaton efficiently details key moments in Dawson's history, lays the groundwork for audiences to empathize with Dawson, and introduces the show's key elements.

With the three performers' arrival, Seaton shifts to Dawson's rigorous rehearsals, during which Dawson not only grapples with additional contentious calls concerning the venue rental, but the performers pressing her, for short-sighted, self-interested reasons, to acquiesce in the segregated-seating policy. Within this prickly environment, Seaton finds multiple opportunities for Dawson to redeploy stories that the audience heard previously and to share new ones. Dawson uses events from her life to inspire the performers during rehearsals to connect more deeply to the motives or emotions of their *Carmen* characters in certain scenes. Similarly, when the performers inject into the rehearsal their challenges to Dawson's leadership, especially regarding decisions concerning the indoor-venue rental, Dawson shares stories of battles she and others fought against racism and gender discrimination to defend her decision-making or alternatively to challenge the performers to fight alongside her. With these

stories, Seaton extols Dawson's life and work and makes manifest the power of sharing that history.

Seaton saves Dawson's most compelling storytelling for late in the play when the plot shifts outside the rehearsal room as Dawson, all alone, confronts the musicians' union board. Employing simple staging that combined narration with embodied action, Howard had Dawson address the audience as if we suddenly were this imposing roomful of powerful white men, while enacting/describing this encounter, thus allowing Seaton to bring us more directly into Dawson's battle with these bigots. The dignified bravery that Graves embodied in Dawson while facing the board's rudeness was inspiring yet unnerving, especially when this meeting degenerated into a brawl leading to Dawson's arrest and subsequent release on bail. Howard then slyly transitioned Dawson's focus from us to the performers back in the rehearsal room, which transformed them, with us, into the "audience" for this story. After Dawson disclosed how a board member triggered the violence by proclaiming, "Everyone knows Negroes can't sing grand opera," the performers revealed that they had agreed in Dawson's absence to join in her struggles by refusing to perform in the segregated-seating venue and committing to

present *Carmen* outdoors, despite the rain or professional risks. The implication here was that we—her offstage audience—join in such struggles also. Telling the story this way paid off, because Seaton and Howard allowed us to experience the bigotry through Dawson's eyes, making the discrimination especially palpable.

Through Dawson's use of storytelling, Seaton found a creative method of shining a spotlight on Dawson's life and work and demonstrating the value of sharing her history (and by implication, the history of people like her). In the final moments of the play the thunderstorm fortuitously stopped, and Dawson transitioned into a storytelling song, with hypnotic, jazz-inspired music by Carlos Simon, that incorporated details from Dawson's previous stories, combined with the image of a rebellious bird that Dawson referenced earlier while rehearsing *Carmen*'s first-act *habanera*. As Dawson held her arms out to the side like wings, the performers stood behind her mirroring those gestures. Evoking a flock of rebellious birds in flight, they all then moved into a "V" formation, as Dawson's story-song invited us in the audience, like those performers earlier, to share in her ongoing struggles for freedom. With the United States' ongoing challenges combating racism and inequality, this play's final call to join in those struggles proved especially timely. Given the richness and complexity of Dawson's history with NNOC, Seaton and Simon could certainly explore the further development of this piece into an even more substantial work, with more original music.

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SOUTH AFRICA'S NATIONAL ARTS FESTIVAL. Makhanda, South Africa. Online, July 8–31, 2021.

South Africa's 2021 National Arts Festival (NAF) was planned as a "hybrid festival." To fit COVID times, organizers curated a program of virtual performances, live events dispersed throughout major cities (for travel-wary patrons), and a socially distant multiday festival in Makhanda, the tiny Eastern Cape town that has hosted the nation's art community annually for nearly fifty years. The multimodal plan reflected an arts sector beleaguered by sixteen months of near-total shutdown, while also addressing the need for programming diversification to deal with constantly shifting pandemic mandates. Organizers clearly recognized that a virtual festival, as implemented in 2020, was insufficient for work-

ing artists, Makhanda businesses, and Eastern Cape traders whose livelihoods depend on a bustling festival economy.

Sadly, a week before events kicked off in Makhanda (formerly Grahamstown), South Africa moved to a new round of lockdowns to combat the Delta variant. On extraordinarily short notice, the NAF was again forced into a wholly virtual format. This move was devastating to overall participation, and particularly hobbling to Makhanda businesses already making preparatory expenditures. The impromptu pivot to a virtual festival created financial and logistical barriers that excluded many theatre artists (fringe festival performers and buskers were most affected), but it also created opportunities for the NAF to show off its technical capacity acquired over the course of the pandemic and for South African theatre to demonstrate the value of its particular ethic of making—which is premised on interdisciplinary sensibilities. The difficulty and necessity of developing performances that could speak as well through digital means as in a live setting was evident in the prestigious Standard Bank Young Artist Awards offering the 2019 winners—whose subsidized, career-defining works were forced haphazardly into a digital format in 2020—an extra year of funding to adopt creative philosophies that could simultaneously encompass mediated and unmediated performance contexts.

In the end, the 2021 virtual NAF provided the public convenient and ongoing access to an extensive web platform that delivered production videos and virtual versions of the festival's many facets. Makhanda's creative infrastructure, like Rhodes University's stages and recording equipment, helped deliver high-quality filmed productions with fidelity to the live auditorium viewing experience. Perhaps due to the availability of these resources, the 2021 NAF seemed to have a more distinctly Eastern Cape identity than felt in years past, including many works performed in isiXhosa, isiZulu, and Sotho, and numerous productions from university drama cohorts in Rhodes, Fort Hare, and Gqeberha.

Befitting the planned hybrid festival, many artists embraced performance skill sets and structural dramaturgies that moved among creative disciplines. South Africa's theatre scene is known for interdisciplinarity, especially "physical theatre," where actors move seamlessly between narrative characterization and abstract, poetic movement episodes. In addition to exhilarating kinetics, physical theatre offers a form of embodied translation for a country with eleven official languages.

This was a major conceit of *Ndinxaniwe* ("I want to drink"), written and directed by Qondiswa