

## The Rich Multiplicity of *Betsey Brown*

Assunta Kent

Ntozake Shange has been working at the intersection of dance, poetry, music, and theatre since the mid-1970's when she developed her Broadway hit *for colored girls*. However, the McCarter's recent production of *Betsey Brown*, the rhythm-and-blues-based story of a middle-class black girl's coming of age in St. Louis in 1959, is Shange's first traditionally structured musical play. Like Shange's choreopoems, *Betsey* examines inequalities in race, gender, and class relations, but through integrated scenes and songs that convey Betsey's adolescent experiences: her first boyfriend, encounters with racist classmates, exposure to sensuous popular music, and an awareness of the fallibility of adults. This blend of musical form and serious content results in a surprisingly exuberant, even optimistic, piece for Shange (*Spell #7, From Okra to Greens*) and co-author/director, Emily Mann (*Still Life, Execution of Justice*).

Scored by Baikida Carroll (jazzman and longtime Shange collaborator) and choreographed by George Faison (*The Wiz, The Josephine Baker Story*), *Betsey* is a musically complex and visually lush spectacle supported by terrific singing, superb dancing, and light-filled, fluid design. And beneath the musical's outward show lies a rich weave of American and African-American historical and cultural elements that operate at various levels: as the political, social, and emotional influences on young Betsey, as the cultural context of recent American history, and as elements of an Afrocentric "total theatre" event. In this article, I review the genesis of the script and give an evaluative synopsis of the production. I then point out some of the distinctive features of this woman-centered African-American musical: the specific journey of a young black poet coming to womanhood and the multiply-positioned self that

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Assunta Kent is a doctoral candidate in Northwestern University's Interdisciplinary Program in Theatre and Drama, specializing in the study and direction of women's and children's theatre for social change. She has published articles and reviews in *Theatre Studies*, *Theatre Topics*, and *Theatre Journal*. Her dissertation concerns the works of Maria Irene Fornes.

begins to emerge, the use of multiple focus, and the incorporation of Afrocentric elements into an American musical form.

### History of the Script

*Betsey Brown* has been ten years in the making—not unusual for an enduring American musical. But like many Shange stories, the life and times of young Betsey Brown have found other forms of expression en route to the musical stage. Shange works like a blues singer, beginning with a strong basic story worthy of prolonged exploration. She then weaves various improvisations in concert with other artists (musicians, dancers, writers, actors, designers). Although she feels constrained by the text-focus of mainstream theatre, Shange occasionally returns for the chance to present her multi-media performances to theatre audiences. *Betsey Brown* typifies the development of a Shange idea from poem to full production.

Shange found that "each genre . . . offered different kinds of emotional and aesthetic opportunities (News)."<sup>1</sup>

First of all, the short story "Betsey Brown" existed for a very long time by itself. . . . It was essentially a prose poem [with] a definite emotional pulse to it. Then [in 1978], I put the story inside a performance piece, *Boogie Woogie Landscapes*, and made the narrative first person. (News)

At this stage, Shange performed the piece in collaboration with Baikida Carroll. The "Betsey Brown" section of *Landscapes* was popular and Shange discovered in performance that "the voices and bodies weren't coming from the same place". (News). So in 1980, she expanded the prose poem into a play workshopped at the New York Shakespeare Festival. By 1983, the text had gained several songs and Emily Mann as director.

But the play was not produced and in 1985, when Shange received a grant to write a novel, she developed *Betsey* in a form through which she "could get an emotional pulse for each of the characters [and] investigate their dreams" (News). Meanwhile Mann began to condense incidents, combine characters, focus on dramatic action, and transform dialogue and poetry into scenes and songs for a book musical. Shange sent pages of the novel as it progressed to Mann for structuring; thus their relationship was not one of novelist and adaptor but of co-authors working on two different projects based on the same story. Later, as the new artistic director of the McCarter, Mann was able to augment the shortened and intensified script in production by enlisting top-

notch designers, musicians, and performers to fill in the context for Betsey's journey toward womanhood. Near the end of the run, Mann offered audiences a chance to explore this theme further by participating in a full-day symposium: "Coming of Age in the USA—The Voice of American Women and the Civil Rights Movement," during which African-American women writers discussed the impact of this period of dramatic social change on their lives and work.

Baikida Carroll, the third pre-production collaborator, drew upon the richness of 20th-century African-American music to convey the emotional source of each character. For example, he blended Marvin Gaye's coaxing style with Al Green's southern accents and Smoky Robinson's sensuality to produce the gardener's courting song, "Sure Do Like to Grow Things," a tune which had women in the audience thrilling and sighing.

In addition, to finding the right emotional pitch, Carroll painstakingly researched the historical styles appropriate for the characters. The unruly children's theme music, "Morning Jump," borrowed its "high kid energy" ("the sort of music that if it were on the radio would eventually get on your nerves") from Chuck Berry and Little Richard, two early rock and roll artists who never actually played together (Dialogue). For the grandmother's youthful reverie, Carroll chose a very specific moment when slow ragtime tunes had followed the Delta Flow down to New Orleans and made the transition from piano to brass band. In this way, Carroll supported the happy, up-tempo feeling of Vida's courtship days with music composed within the idiom of that era. The coherence of the score was secured by an interlocking system of blues changes and melodies. For example, the simple lullaby, "Love Is," was transformed for Betsey's plea, "Don't Leave Me," by underscoring the melody with blues chords.

By the time *Betsey* opened at the McCarter in April 1991, it was difficult for the collaborators to remember who actually wrote each word or passage.

### The Shape and Storyline of the Production

*Betsey Brown* opens with a cinema-style location shot.<sup>2</sup> Watercolor slides, inspired by Romare Bearden collages, wash the front and back scrimms: a cloud-scudded full moon melts into sunrise, St. Louis businesses fade into residential streets and gardens, revealing the Brown's 3-story Victorian at the center of a busy mixed-class black community. The prologue music and choreography are splendidly synchronized. The entire cast uses shared lyrics to support their individual actions: the gardener greets Grandma, parents get children off to school, energetic teens dance and flirt on the street.

But an argument between Betsey's parents, Jane (Pamela Isaacs) and Greer (Tommy Hollis), disturbs the apparent harmony. Greer insists over Jane's objections that his children will take part in Civil Rights demonstrations and be among the first black children to integrate white schools. Unfortunately, this inciting incident, which leaves thirteen-year-old Betsey without her mother's guidance at a critical period, is embedded within the prologue, too quick and too far upstage to make a clear impression on the audience.

In the next scene, Betsey (Raquel Herring) sits alone in her thinking tree down left; Jane enters, small suitcase in hand, before a projected "colored-only" hotel. They share a bittersweet duet, singing "If you have to follow your dreams, go as far as you must, but please don't forget about me." This scene provides our only feeling for Betsey's closeness with her mother and explains that Jane is searching for a peaceful place for her family. The mood of quiet communion between mother and daughter is broken by the disorder of the motherless household's "Morning Jump." Greer, relatively oblivious to the chaos, hurries off to work at the hospital, leaving grandmother Vida (Anne Duquesnay) to scold the children off to school.

Alone at last, Betsey hopscotches and ponders which "Negro man of renown" she might wed, until high school basketball player Eugene Boyd (Harold Perrineau, Jr.) invites her to "be his queen," in an exhilarating dance number, "Stick With Me." Before Betsey can recover from receiving her first kiss on the cheek, she is caught by an older girlfriend, Regina (Tichina Arnold), who dances her own persuasive philosophy of love, "Fast Ain't Necessarily Last," before cutting school to run off with her tough boyfriend, Roscoe (Ted Levy).

Meanwhile, we see the first harbingers of racial collision, as "white kids" (black actors in white half masks and pinafores or coveralls) taunt 15-year-old Charlie (Mark Joseph) at the bus stop. When white students laugh derisively as Betsey recites a Black English poem, the teacher applauds their ignorance by insisting that "what you've recited isn't even English." The staging of this scene merits a closer look.

After the white children are dismissed, Betsey and the teacher continue their debate down center in front of a projected chalkboard listing white anglophone poets. The teacher hoots, "Paul Lawrence Dunbar, who?!?" and begins intoning the names of canonized poets, "Whittier, Eliot," to which Betsey retorts, "Phyllis Wheatley, Sterling Brown." The verbal duel continues, until Betsey has the last word, adamantly forwarding the name of "Langston Hughes." Focus shifts up center: Charlie is trying to escort young Margot (Mesha Millington) and Allard (Amir Williams) through the threatening mob

of "white kids," who are jeering and thrusting their extended arms and jabbing fingers at the children. As the mob swirls around the children, individual "white kids" make the thrusting gesture out to the (predominantly white) audience, yelling "Nigger go home. You don't belong here." This staging not only made the audience subject to the threats aimed at the Brown children, but placed us psychologically, almost physically, with the children as they tried to move downstage, through the mob, seemingly towards us, and (possible) safety. After the little children are pulled away, Charlie fights his way out of the mob. The scene ends with Betsey slapped down, lying outside a looming chain link fence, crying out, "I am so an American."

During a beautifully executed scene change in which the scrimms dividing Betsey from the jeering "white kids" are flown out to reveal the warm dark interior of the Brown dining room, the wounded children are received home by their stoic father and agitated grandmother. Vida likens the incident to the lynching of her Great Uncle Julius and argues against integration: "White people are trouble enough far off. No need to be all up under 'em too." Greer counters with his own piece of family history—that the Klan had burned down his childhood home—implying that separatism ensures neither safety nor equality. Greer then invokes the tradition of black people who have protested discrimination with dignity in a song based on the philosophy of family friend W.E.B. Dubois, entitled "Children, Listen to the Voices of the Past."

With the onset of summer and the school year over, romance takes precedence. One hot afternoon, the Brown children and Betsey's boyfriend, Eugene, coax Regina and Roscoe into giving them a "love kissing" demonstration. The children are inspired to experiment with their own sensuality—dancing wildly to a calypso beat. Just as Betsey proclaims, "if this love, I'll think I'll get it," Vida interrupts the proceedings in search of her fan. Eugene sensibly disappears but Regina stands her ground against Vida's heavily ironic comments, retorting that "your kind always look down on me an' my kind." After Regina leaves, Betsey mocks Vida's admonitions to "keep her skirts down" and to avoid the dangers of such "low-down colored mess."

The household, now totally out of control with Jane's return nowhere in sight, is shaken by a blues wail from the back of the house. Carrie (Kecia Lewis-Evans) has come up from Arkansas to take charge of the "chirren." She quickly wins the hearts of the younger children, but must contend with Betsey's mixed feelings about a new mother figure. When Betsey "marks" Carrie, doing a very funny imitation of Carrie's show-stopping entrance number complete with funky strut and throaty vocalizations, Carrie rises to the occasion. Instead of directly confronting Betsey, Carrie pulls out her paring knife to illustrate a song about another "little twitch of a gal" who tried to call her out of her name

(by insulting Carrie's family background). The children join Carrie in unseating Betsey as surrogate boss of the house. Carrie then soothes the children with the lullaby, "Love Is." Betsey almost lets herself be comforted by Carrie, but Act I ends with Betsey dashing up the stairs shouting, "you're *not* our Mama."

In Act II, despite the pressures of budding sexuality and racial and family tension, the Brown household is running smoothly. The children are becoming helpful and courteous; Carrie has accepted the attentions of the gardener, Mr. Jeff (Eugene Fleming), and is supervising Betsey's visits with her boyfriend, Eugene. However, Carrie knows that the children are grieving for their mama, so she kneels them down in the kitchen to put them "in touch with their spirits." In a profoundly moving spiritual (which left actors and audience sobbing), the actress employed her incredibly versatile vocal power, from childlike pleading soprano to deeply assured alto, to lead us to a spiritual realm beyond the Brown's kitchen, the McCarter Theatre, and perhaps the earthly plane. Even their incensed, Presbyterian grandmother cannot break into this sacred space until the children, in particular Betsey, have made contact with their mother's spirit.

And soon after, Jane comes home amid thankful reunions with her mother, her husband, and (after some explanation and apology) with Betsey. Life resumes for the household with both Mama and Carrie parenting the children in their different ways. One day, after catching Betsey making out in the garage with Eugene, Carrie advises her to "get her share of runnin' hugs and laughin'," but to wait until she's grown to find a good man. Unfortunately, Jane overhears only the last portion of Carrie's talk in which she evokes a grown up love that would be worth waiting for. The argument that ensues between the two "mamas" exposes many of the tensions in the play.

When Jane accuses Carrie of teaching her children "low life ways" and refuses to let either Betsey or Carrie explain their conversation, Carrie finally reacts in defense, "I may be nothin' but a country colored gal, Mrs., but that don't make you better 'n me." Betsey can see, but is powerless to prevent, the imminent rupture based on the differences in class, education, and experience between the two women—the very differences that make them both so valuable to the children. Each is convinced of the necessity of the survival strategies she espouses; both are vulnerable to the other's questions about the success of their child-rearing practices. They hurt each other so deeply that they cannot respond to Betsey's plea that she needs them both, that they need to love each other.

Left alone onstage, Betsey concludes, "Got no mama now. Got to be mama to myself," and runs away from her difficult, disappointing home into

the shadowy street world. Bewildered and harrassed by pimps and pushers, Betsey meets two old friends who try to send her back home. The first is her sexually precocious friend, Regina, alone, pregnant, and singing the blues. The second friend is Carrie, carpetbag in hand, on the road again. Betsey clings to her, promising to go home if only Carrie will come back too. Carrie makes it clear that she and Jane could not co-exist in the house and that the street is no place for Betsey to grow up. In a tearjerker duet, Betsey begs Carrie not to leave her as Carrie tries to calm her with a reprise of "Love Is." Finally, Carrie admonishes Betsey to use her advantages to "make the world a better place" for herself and the working class people who make her middle class privilege possible:

Look, you got good clothes, money, a roof over your head, no real worries in the whole world. Do somethin' with that. You got work to do. You owe us."

She then gives Betsey the courage to fulfill her charge by reminding her, with fingers touching her temple, "I'm easy to find. Jus' call me up." This poignant moment between Carrie and Betsey is overheard by Jane. But this time Jane recognizes that Carrie shares her desire to instill in Betsey a sense of responsibility for advancing the race; now Jane can appreciate and acknowledge Carrie's different gifts and experience.

The show ends with Betsey's family intact and deeply influenced by their contact with Carrie. Betsey and to a smaller degree Jane have completed one portion of a journey toward self-understanding and strong black womanhood. The show closes with Betsey's soaring affirmation, "Got to be enough love, got to be enough love to go around."

### Production Analysis

This musical version of *Betsey Brown* fulfilled my desire to experience the aural world of Shange's novel—the musical references, rhythmic speech, and varied intonations of the characters. But as Shange noted, condensing the novel for the musical stage was also a process of "letting go," and in some instances I wish more of the novel's complexity had been retained. With the exception of Carrie, the adult characters in the musical are flatter, less conflicted about how to survive in a hostile society, and almost too sure of their advice to the children. Vida's solo does reveal that this conservative grandmother still cherishes the memory of being "a hotsy-totsy flapper"; but Greer is reduced from a conga-playing doctor who embraces all of African-

American culture (from jazz and boxing to DuBois' and King's philosophies) to a rather sententious and humorless activist. Neither Jane's complicated reasons for leaving nor her delicate, deep relationship with Betsey is made clear enough to balance Carrie's more obvious contributions to Betsey's growing consciousness. The sense that all of these influential people are being seen through Betsey's eyes is intermittent. Betsey is not given enough solo stage time to share what she makes of these important people or their actions. And though I feel that the reviewers succumbed to the urge to "doctor" this new script, I too would have liked a separate scene for the conflict between Jane and Greer, and a scene between Betsey and her mother would have strengthened the context for Betsey's exposure to other influences.

However, I believe that small changes in the direction and acting of the existing script could sharpen the focus on Betsey while still allowing other characters to take their solos. I suspect that too much of the staging was left to the choreographer, who favored large gestures, frontal positioning, and audience address when some scenes, especially those in which fragile bonds are being forged, needed the deeper internalized approach to character that director Mann had originally intended.<sup>3</sup> For example, Greer delivered the story of the Klan attack from upstage over the heads of the seated children to the audience, rather than sharing this decisive episode with his children.

Once these significant but manageable problems are cleared up (solos and scenes like those recommended above had been written but cut from the current production), the "lack of focus" commented upon by reviewers may be seen as a rich multiplicity informing the complex subjectivity of a young black woman.<sup>4</sup> Shange has always drawn black women protagonists who resist essentialized categorizations based simply on race, class, or gender, and with *Betsey Brown* we get to follow the journey that results in a multiply positioned female subject. Not only do the various characters embody differing survival strategies but in the course of the story Betsey is able to observe these strategies in action, to judge their effectiveness. For example, we see the gap between Carrie's gospel of practical survival and Jane's dreams of rearing her children to be educated leaders of the race, and the chasm of misunderstanding that separates them; but hope rests in Betsey's ability to see that both "mamas" are right according to their backgrounds. We see the possibility that Betsey will be able to blend and select from her models the strategies appropriate to future challenges.

Shange and Mann also created multiply-positioned characters in order to explore class, gender, and color caste issues within the black community. Vida never fully accepts dark-skinned Greer with his interest in "nasty nigger music"; Jane reveals her class prejudices and insecurity about how to parent her "gifted

beautiful children" in her argument with Carrie. The play establishes a complex black world in which the examination of black characters' virtues and foibles need not fall into negative stereotypes nor overlook human failings. This uncompromising look, again seen through Betsey's eyes, is a hallmark of the character's maturity and signals the unusual depth and seriousness of this musical comedy.

Part of the complexity of the black world of *Betsey Brown* may be attributed to its incorporation of an Afrocentric, rather than a Eurocentric, world view. From an Afrocentric perspective, extra-linguistic elements such as dance and song are *mojos*, spirit-forces capable of conjuring up a "non-cerebral felt reality," and language employs *nommo* or *ase*, the spiritual power of words that causes things to happen.<sup>5</sup> In her confrontation with the English teacher, Betsey engages in an American version of West African praise-singing. She invokes the tradition of African-American poets, claims them as her poetic lineage and connects herself with their spiritual power through the incantation of their names. In the gospel scene, Carrie calls upon Jesus to put the children in touch with their own spirits and the spirit of their mother. Her rocking movements, highly elaborated repetition of sounds, and formulaic praising of Jesus through song are reminiscent of American pentacostal and Caribbean *voudoun* ceremonies, both based on the African practice of calling up spirits and moving celebrants into a trance-like receptive state.

"Signifying," the verbal manipulation of an opponent through wit and indirection, is a more secular but no less effective, employment of Afrocentric word power.<sup>6</sup> When Betsey wishes to undercut Carrie's authority over the household, she "marks" or imitates her, even beginning her parody up in a tree like the legendary Signifying Monkey. But she is no match for Carrie, a veteran who easily "caps" (bests) Betsey without once referring directly to either Betsey or her insults. After singing a song about "calling out" someone else who once insulted her, Carrie underlines her message in indirect but no uncertain terms, "I don't tell no tales and I'll tell you no lies. Ain't nobody sass me and stay 'live." Unfortunately, signifying behaviors are often the only available strategies for oppressed people. In the fight between the housekeeper and her mistress, once Carrie recognizes that Jane is "othering" her because of her class background ("I don't want you teaching my children low-life ways. I don't allow drinkin' round my children, nor courtin', nor the Holy Ghost"), Carrie's only defense is to call Jane out ("Miss Highfalutin, Bright-Talking, Smart, Miss Educated!"), a strategy that can only lead to irrevocable rupture among rivals. But the play does not end before Betsey understands why Carrie called out her mother, nor before Jane acknowledges the value of Carrie's "mother-wit" for the children.<sup>7</sup>

In 1976, during the successful run of *for colored girls*, Shange was asked by Michele Wallace, then columnist for the *Village Voice*, why she did not write about her own middle class background. At the time, Shange answered, "I'm not avoiding writing about my middle-classness. There are just aspects of it that I haven't dealt with yet. When I understand them I'll probably write about them" (Wallace 133). With the production of *Betsey Brown*, Shange invites us to experience one version of a middle-class black girl's rich, multi-faceted world.

*Chicago, Illinois*

## Notes

1. References to unpublished McCarter materials will be abbreviated as follows: the newsletter "Calendar News" (News) and the audience outreach lecture/discussion "Dialogue on Drama" (Dialogue).

2. The superlative design team included: David Mitchell (Scenery and Projections), Pat Collins (Lighting Design), Jennifer von Mayrhauser (Costume Design), and Sandy Struth (Properties).

3. "I'm asking them to use the best of American stage acting, as if there were no music, as if they were doing an August Wilson, Eugene O'Neill, or a Williams play. The internal investigations have to go that deep, that real in terms of character work. . . . This piece requires something beyond the presentational acting style you usually see in a musical. The characters don't act a scene and then "go into" a song. It's all organic, all internal." (Mann, "News")

4. These reviews include: Clark Groome, "New 'Betsey Brown' an improvement," *Chestnut Hill Local*, Thursday, April 11, 1991; Simon Saltzman, "Happy moments for 'Betsey Brown'," *The Daily Record*, Princeton, April 11, 1991; Bob Campbell, "Lively music, dance keep all eyes on 'Betsey Brown'," *The Star-Ledger*, April 10, 1991; and Mel Gussow, "Coming of age with help from a wise troublemaker," *The New York Times*, April 13, 1991.

5. For an explanation of *mojos* in theatrical criticism, see Richards 1983, 76. For a similar explanation of *nommo*, see Harrison 1972, xx; and for *asè*, see Richards 1991, 383.

6. Abrahams, Roger D., *Talking Black*, Rowley, MA: Newbury House Publishers, 1976, 50-51.

7. The ending of the Carrie/Betsey/Jane relationship has been softened for musical comedy. In the novel, Jane fires Carrie over the telephone when Carrie calls in late to work with the explanation that she had been jailed. Jane assumes that Carrie must have been guilty and is not interested in hearing the details. Readers are left to wonder if someone insulted Carrie in a way that forced her to defend herself with a knife as well as with her signifying skill, or if she was jailed without due cause.