

dance of the holy ghosts: a play on memory: Digital Dramaturgy

By Marcus Gardley
Directed by Kwame Kwei-Armah
Oct 9–Nov 17, 2013

Oscar Clifton is a Blues man living through his memories of the past, until his estranged grandson Marcus pays a visit. Together, they confront a history of loves, regrets, and missed opportunities. This acclaimed play by Marcus Gardley is a poetic family drama set in the key of Blues—a memory-scape skipping seamlessly across the decades.

Meet Marcus Gardley

Playwright's Biography

Marcus Gardley grew up in the 1980s in Oakland, surrounded by a tight-knit community and raised by parents and grandparents from the South. He recalls, “Growing up in Oakland was really magical. I have family that all lived in the same vicinity; it was a huge community. I grew up in a political environment, but also a spiritual and diverse one. It had a huge effect on me.”

Gardley spent his Sundays listening to his father preach, and the Black Church has informed and inspired some of his finest work. Though he started out as a poet, Gardley became captivated by playwriting during his college years at San Francisco State. He went on to Yale School of Drama, where he studied under celebrated playwright Lynn Nottage.

Since then, Gardley has had productions at major theaters across the United States, and his work has garnered accolades for its soulful sincerity and lyricism. He currently splits his time between New York City and Providence, Rhode Island, where he teaches playwriting at Brown University. He makes a mean dish of Brussels sprouts and thoroughly enjoys mint juleps.

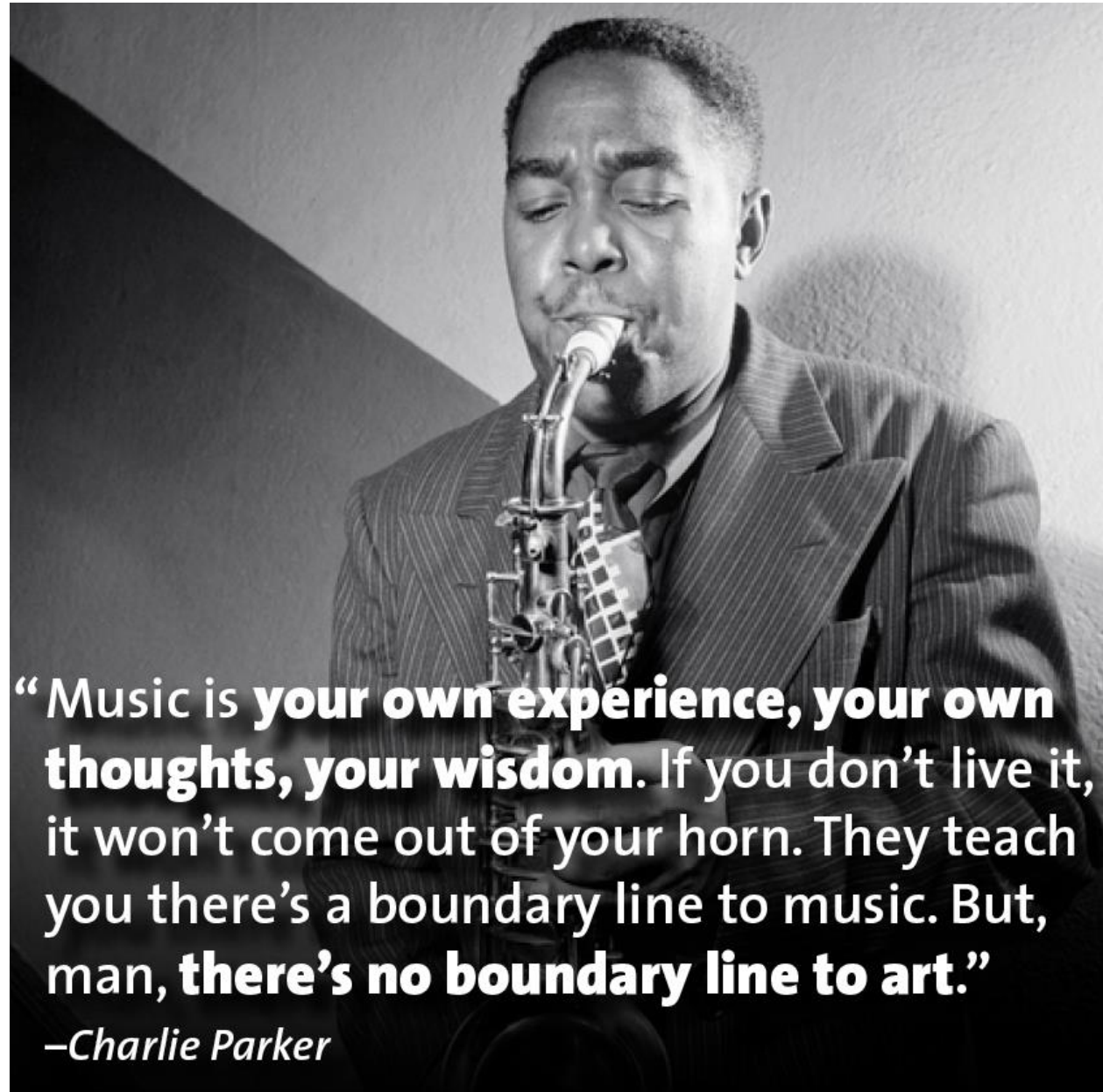
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cASQ4qLylX8>

Chasing the Blues

“The blues is a music that celebrates freedom, even freedom in the imperfect, through the symbolism of travel and the ability to resolve problems by distancing oneself from them. The blues are resplendent with imagery of roads, rivers, and railroad tracks to be traveled; with cars, boats, and trains to serve as vehicles useful both in going to and coming from; and with oceans, mountains, and deserts to either be traversed in pursuit of a desire or placed in the path of pursuing troubles. [...] No slave ever sang the blues; as both a social role and as a philosophy, the bluesman has claimed freedom and personhood over everything else, no matter what the price. The price was often an economically and socially marginal existence even by the standards of his time and place. To be a

bluesman, however, also provided high status within the tightly knit blues society. [...] The bluesman put the

truth out there regardless of the mainstream's reaction to it and was granted harsh respect for his insistence on living life on his own terms. Living in a society structured by design to deny personhood to members of the blues culture, the bluesman's uncompromising claim to it is nothing less than revolutionary." (Aschoff, "The Poetry of the Blues" 44-45)



“Music is your own experience, your own thoughts, your wisdom. If you don’t live it, it won’t come out of your horn. They teach you there’s a boundary line to music. But, man, there’s no boundary line to art.”

–Charlie Parker

II. The Oakland Blues Scene

Baby Harlem

Adapted from "Living for the City: Migration, Education, and the Rise of the Black Panther Party in Oakland, California" by Donna Jean Murch



“Once in Oakland, Southern migrants expressed their social ambitions by establishing their own institutions and transforming many of the existing ones. Nothing reflected the urban promise of the city for African American migrants like Seventh Street, Oakland’s historic black business district. Christened affectionately by residents as “Baby Harlem,” this commercial strip in West Oakland became the center of black life in the East Bay well into the sixties. The influx of newcomers provided a ready-made market for small retail, personal services, and especially entertainment. A teenage migrant from rural Arkansas later remembered, “Market Street and Seventh and San Pablo... was just bubbling over

at the seams with black business after black business after black business.” Informal restaurants sprang up to tempt workers with plentiful and inexpensive southern-style food, while the twilight blues world of “juke joints,” “honky tonks,” and “buckets of blood” offered a more ephemeral solace. Margaret Starks, a migrant to the adjacent community of Richmond, California, remembered the significance of the blues club. “Those people didn’t have too much, so they weren’t about to let go of the music and the good times they were used to. It made them feel better. I remember one lady from Louisiana, had gold all in her mouth, told me that she loved to hear that music because... [it] made her forget all that stuff in the shipyards. She always felt better when she left.” Familiar styles of music and faith allowed southerners to recreate the social world they had left behind. Blues clubs competed not only with one another but also with the army of churches opening their doors to the swelling tide of southerners. Maya Angelou, a young migrant from Stamps, Arkansas, remembered Seventh Street as a place where “bars and smoke shops sat in the laps of storefront churches.” Although a sizeable portion of newcomers from southern Louisiana identified as Catholic, many from northern Louisiana, Texas, and other parts of the South embraced Evangelical Protestantism. Pentecostals and Southern Baptists predominated—especially among rural-urban migrants—and charismatic traditions deeply influenced styles of worship, even among black Catholics. Southern music and religious practices became essential to community formation for newcomers to California during the Second Great Migration.

On the Oakland Blues and the Rise & Fall of Seventh Street

Taken from 7th Street Blues: An amazing music scene once thrived in West Oakland, by Justin Goldman. Published by Diablo Magazine.

The names zip from Ronnie Stewart's lips like licks from his electric guitar: Ray Charles. Aretha Franklin. Charles Brown. Lafayette "The Thing" Thomas. Big Joe Turner. Bobby "Blue" Bland. Teddy "Blues Master" Watson. Ike and Tina Turner. Some of these musicians achieved worldwide celebrity; some never found the fame they deserved. But they all had one thing in common: They played the blues on West Oakland's Seventh Street.

"We call it the Harlem of the West Coast," says Stewart, the executive director of the Bay Area Blues Society. "A lot of artists hold Seventh Street dearly to the development of their careers. This was a proving ground for the greats.

Oakland became a blues mecca during the 1940s. The city's shipbuilding industry boomed in support of World War II, and the consequent profusion of manufacturing jobs and military bases brought a huge influx of African Americans to the Bay Area. These workers, many who had been sharecroppers or laborers making as little as 75 cents an hour in the South, were able to make three or four dollars an hour on the West Coast. Many settled near the shipyards in West Oakland, and a vibrant entertainment district sprang up on Seventh Street, where the blocks were crowded with pool halls, card rooms, and as many as 40 blues clubs, including the Lincoln Theater, Esther's Orbit Room, and Slim Jenkins' Place.

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Stewart was born in 1949 and grew up in the neighborhood. His childhood memories include listening to Ray Charles play at a club called the Barn and seeing Lowell Fulson, looking “like he was 10 feet tall, dressed all in white,” as he hopped into a Lincoln in front of the corner liquor store.

“In every black person in the community, there’s some kind of musical connection,” says Stewart, who became a guitarist and went on to cofound the Bay Area Blues Society in 1985. “A lot of the songs were about the struggle, the down lifestyle they had in the South. And music meant so much because it’s a form of escape. As a kid, you hear this stuff so much [that] when you pick up your instrument, all you have to learn is the technique to play it, because you already know the syncopation, you know the timing, you know how the notes should go. That’s why I played music. It’s in my blood.”

As the scene in Oakland prospered, the music took on a unique, local character. The Bay Area was already a haven for jazz musicians, and blues and jazz artists began to collaborate, creating a new style of blues. West Coast blues, as it came to be known, was more heavily arranged than Delta or Chicago blues and featured more complex chords, faster beats, and bigger bands that often used horn players.

“They use three or four pieces [in Chicago blues bands],” Stewart says. “We use five, six, seven, eight, nine pieces out here. Ray Charles was starving, and Slim Jenkins would let him play [at his club]. Ray had seven, eight horns because people wanted horn bands—the clubs wanted that thick sound.”

Oakland’s creative hotbed also gave birth to many famous songs. In a recording studio at the corner of Seventh and Center streets, Bob Geddins, Roy Hawkins, and Jimmy McCracklin combined to write “The Thrill Is Gone,” the song that propelled B. B. King to superstardom. Geddins also wrote the James Brown hit “Why Does Everything Have to Happen to Me” and combined with Jimmy Wilson to write “Tin Pan Alley,” which has been recorded by more than 200 musicians, including Stevie Ray Vaughan.

Seventh Street continued to blossom throughout the ‘40s and ‘50s. However, a series of urban development projects would combine to bring about the demise of the music scene. In the late ‘50s, the Cypress Street Viaduct (the section of I-880 that collapsed during the Loma Prieta earthquake) was erected, cutting West Oakland off from the rest of the city. Then, in 1960, the U.S. Postal Service demolished 12 blocks of Seventh Street to clear the way for a state-of-the-art post office, in the process displacing 400 homes and businesses.

The death knell came in the form of the clacking and whooshing of speeding BART trains. In order to save money, the West Oakland BART station was built aboveground, with elevated train tracks running right over Seventh Street.

Now the street is lined with empty lots and boarded-up storefronts. The neighborhood is best known for crime statistics. Esther's Orbit Room is the lone club that remains from the glory years, and throughout the day it shakes with the roar of trains passing overhead.

Yet a great deal of work is being done to ensure that West Oakland's best days are not forgotten. The Bay Area Blues Society has garnered more than \$2 million in grants from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, the City of Oakland, and the Metropolitan Transit Authority to set up The Music They Played on 7th Street Walk of Fame. Stewart hopes to break ground later this year on the walk, which will feature a series of four-by-four-foot bronze and silver sidewalk panels commemorating the artists who lived and performed on Seventh Street. The walk of fame and the planned historic district will accompany a larger development—including a transit village similar to the one that surrounds the Fruitvale BART station—aimed at revitalizing the neighborhood.

In addition, the UC Berkeley Graduate School of Journalism and Graduate School of Architecture are producing a video game, Remembering 7th Street, that simulates life in West Oakland during its heyday. The game will include replications of clubs, such as Slim Jenkins' and Esther's, and a soundtrack composed of that era's music.

"The game is for old-timers [who lived there] and for kids in Oakland who have no knowledge of what that amazing scene was all about," says professor Paul Grabowicz, director of the New Media Program at Berkeley. "And, of course, jazz and blues lovers." The video game, which Grabowicz hopes will be ready for release in about a year, and all of Stewart's efforts (which include a CD and a forthcoming book, both titled The Music They Played on 7th Street) are ensuring that Oakland will always have the blues. As Stewart says, "Blues has never died. The history here had to be preserved so another generation can see how important these linkages are." Full article available at tinyurl.com/7th-Street-Blues

Interview

Playwright Marcus Gardley shares some of his inspiration for *dance of the holy ghosts*

Interview by Catherine Maria Rodriguez, Production Dramaturg

Catherine María Rodríguez: How did you start writing *dance of the holy ghosts*?

Marcus Gardley: Oh, that's a great question. Well you know, actually, I got really frustrated with the plays that I had written previously because they were huge—they required a lot of actors, they were epic, a lot of scenes. And my favorite writer is Shakespeare, so it was kind of Shakespeare-esque in scope, not aesthetic. I got frustrated, one, because the plays were hard to produce because it would be so expensive to produce them, but also because I think a lot of collaborators grappled with my style of writing and the kind of theater that I was

interested in talking about. So, I decided I was going to write a play for fun, that was the object. Just write for fun—it's not about getting produced, you're not writing for anybody but yourself, and this is a play you'll never share with anybody. I started writing about my childhood. The very first scene, oddly enough, was with my grandfather who—I realized when I was writing—I didn't know enough about. My only memory of him was me breaking his gumball machine and him hitting me; he died soon after that. I felt that I needed to know more about this man so that I could have—even though they wouldn't be my own memories—other memories that were positive. What's funny was that when I started asking people things about him, there were no positive memories. [Laughs] And I made them tell me positive memories. Then my brother shared this great memory he had with my grandfather, who used to pick him up from school and used to make him mayonnaise and sugar sandwiches. The way my brother described it, I thought, "There was more to this guy. I think a lot of people missed it." The play became an homage to him, to this man I never knew. And so most of it is fiction in terms of his personality, but the events are all real.

CMR: Was writing the play also an exercise in exorcising something that was haunting you?

MG: Yeah, you know, that's such a great question. I think what was haunting me was—partly, I think why I wrote about my grandfather was that I didn't have enough male figures in my life that I feel like influenced me, and I wanted that, I wanted that all my life. Now my dad has been a great influence in my life, but it's really been just him. I've always looked for other father figures in my life. Through that, I really tried to talk about Oscar honestly, to make him multidimensional so I can see the love that I think he had, you know. Through letters that I found that he wrote my grandmother, you knew that he was a romantic; he had to possess love for his children and his wife.

CMR: What were the letters?

MG: When my grandmother died, we were going through all of her belongings, and we found these letters hidden under her tax papers in this—you could tell, this prized box, you could tell whatever's in the box was important. We found these letters, and I started reading them. We all thought she hated him, but the fact that she kept them all proved that, indeed, she must have had some love for him. And I also think that the fact that she died very soon after him—I think she died of a broken heart, a little bit. He begged her constantly to come back, but she wouldn't. And it's just so complicated. She said she didn't write him back, though she must have written him back because he references her responses. But it clearly wasn't enough to get her to see him face-to-face. And yet, when he didn't leave her anything [in his will], it destroyed her. But, see, I didn't think she wanted money, I think she wanted something else. I think she wanted something that... he knew she would value, that only they would understand the significance. She couldn't find it, and we don't know what—we knew she was looking for something, but it wasn't money—she didn't want it. Their love was so deep and so powerful, and we all don't know the extent of it. We just know that it was enough to take them both out.

CMR: When my abuelito died, my abuelita died two months to the day.

MG: Wow. See that? That's crazy. It happens. It happens a lot.

CMR: It does. That's right. What other memories does the play draw on?

MG: That's great. The memories the play draws on are the—the one of my mother being left at the altar. He didn't walk her down the aisle; she wasn't left at the altar. But he was supposed to walk her down the aisle—that's one that made it in the play. The one where my grandfather shot my mother's lover and tried to kill her—the killing her part didn't make it in the play, but that memory. And then there was an occasion when my mother begged my grandfather to pick my brother up from school. Tanisha was the first girl I had a crush on—that's all real. She used to jump rope and everything. Her real name was Tanisha Taylor. So that part is real. There's a fusion of family members' memories, my brother's memories, stories that I heard, and then my own memories because I was taught when you tell a story you add your own thread to it, so that you kind of own part of it. It's your stake in the story. In this way, my grandmother taught me this great thing; she says stories change over time. There's no one way to tell anything, she says, because people forget, people lie, and people lie on accident. So, if you're going to tell a story, your job is to add your own piece to it.

CMR: Some of your family members were preachers, right?

MG: Oh, yeah. A lot of them. [Laughs]

CMR: Can you speak to the storytelling in preaching, poetry, playwriting—and the Blues?

MG: Oh, beautiful question. Well, my father's a pastor. When I was growing up, he said that I was going to be ordained to the ministry which meant that I was going to be a preacher. But this is my ministry, theater. All the men in our family—I actually think all of them, on both sides—are preachers in some way. That's what we grew up with. And when the family gathers, the matriarchs—I say matriarchs because all the older men are dead—the matriarchs tell stories. My great grandmother's alive, she's 96. We always grew up with stories always very present in our everyday life in my family cause there's preachers but also there'd be the gathering—you gather for the story. And this story changes. My great grandmother tells this incredible story about her own father named Madison Eaton—which of course "Eaton" ended up in the play. My great-grandmother had a stroke and so this hand [motions to left arm] is always very stiff. And she will wave it, all over everyone as they sit around her. And she always starts this story with "This is the story of a man named Madison Eaton who freed himself from slavery." That's how the story starts. And that magic that she blesses you with...! We all tell stories. My brother's a poet, and my sister writes novels. So we're all writers, all storytellers.

CMR: That's beautiful. What role does spirit play in storytelling for you?

MG: Oh wow. Spirit is central to storytelling, I think. In the Blues they call it a "sweet release," which means that it's the end—what, you know, we call catharsis in theater, in the Blues they call it "sweet release." Lorca called it "duende."

CMR: Duende, that's right.

MG: It's all the same thing. What it means is the storytelling or the theatrical event that you're experiencing overwhelms you to the point where you have an emotional response that cannot be explained with everyday language, only through emotion, which makes it both, which makes it spiritual. And Kwame lives by this. I don't write anything that doesn't have or evoke the spirit. It's not a Judeo-Christian ideology, although there is a way in that way. It's just releasing something in you—you don't have to have gone through it, but you can relate on some level, or you empathize on some level, with the people in the play that makes you love the story, that makes you want to be a better person, or that makes you want to change the world. And so to me, that's the purpose of doing it.

CMR: I love that. So, as a poet-playwright—

MG: Yes. [Laughs]

CMR: —which is how you self-describe, right?

MG: Thank you. Absolutely.

CMR: Has that tradition—of the Blues, of storytelling, of playwriting—been a part of your personal journey? And what's your relationship, as a poet-playwright, to words and to music and to soul?

MG: Wow. So, I started out as a poet, and then, I think a lot of my teachers were telling me “these are not poems, these are plays” because I had stage directions in the poems. For me it was a natural—I don't believe I changed anything, really. I just found the medium in which I could be more represented. But I think the Blues and poetry are present in my work because I believe in heightened form of reality, and they're the only way to get there. I think that people come to theater not only to see a skewed version of the real world, but—because the world is lifted in a way, you actually can see truth. It's too real if it's just realism, that's my theory. But magical realism, which is the aesthetic I work in and which I use by heightening poetry, allows us to actually see the world in a very particular lens that gets at a particular truth that I think, is very honest and feels more real than realism if that makes sense.

CMR: Yes!

MG: My favorite author is Toni Morrison; I also like [Gabriel García] Márquez. And I like their work because the very fact that we are able to live on a planet floating in the galaxy, you know [Laughs] and that we know very little, even about the human body—like all of these things, it's magic. Magic is real. And the only way to really explain magic is through poetry. That's the only way. 'Cause they're spells, right? A play to me is a spell, and if it's done right you will enchant, you know, and heal.

CMR: I love it. In Blues lore—I find this fascinating—in Blues lore, Robert Johnson made a deal with the devil at the crossroads—

MG: Yes!

CMR: —but here’s a Bluesman, Oscar, who’s made a deal with God.

MG: Yes! [Snaps] Thank you.

CMR: Can you speak to that just a little bit?

MG: Yeah, you know what, I’m so glad you brought that up because that was my entry in to Blues—I love that story so much. I wanted to pay homage to that story, but I wanted to do it very loosely. What I always do when I do adaptations is that it’s very, very loose. I flipped it because it’s easy for him to see his soul to the devil to get this gift. That’s like the myth of, of—

CMR: Faust.

MG: Thank you, the myth of Faust. But here if it’s God, then we have to look at it a different way, and it’s not so easy, you know. Oscar has a gift, and God actually wants him to use his gift, so it’s the total opposite. And he knows that God wants him to use that gift for God’s glory, but what I’m doing is—it’s subversive because God wants him to play the Blues. God doesn’t want him singing the Gospel. So it’s very subversive. Very subversive. But God likes the Blues, too. I love that this character won’t do God’s work, which is the Blues, because he wants God to give his dead wife back to life. You know. It’s just all of these things about Oscar that I really like and I find both crazy and yet very real. At the end of the day the story is really about a man who has to come to terms with the fact that his wife is gone and that she’s gone because he’s partly to blame, and that he needs to grieve. He needs to grieve, and he refuses. And because he refuses to grieve he can’t actually be there for his grandson. Because grief can do that to you—it can prevent you from both living and also connecting to the people that actually love you the most.

CMR: For you has this play been a “sweet release”?

MG: Yes. It’s been a sweet release—I’m going to tell you, when I was learning how to write a play my teachers said, “Never write a play about yourself. That’s a big, big mistake.” And, I’m telling you, this has been the hardest play of my career to write because it’s hard to see yourself, first of all, and then, two, it’s hard to write about personal things—things that personal—because people are going to see it and they know you, you don’t want to offend anyone, but also you kind of need years of distance to really look at it honestly. But at the time, I needed it. It’s been eight years since the [first] production of this play, and it almost went to Broadway twice. It’s had quite a journey. I’m so glad it’s here, at Center Stage, because I feel like it’s in the hands of a creative team, a theater, and an artistic director that both get me and get the importance of the work—but are also really interested in the deeper bone marrow of what I’m trying to do. Because I’ve now had those eight years, it feels like a sweet release. It feels like... I’m relaxed, and I’m not worried about what the play’s going to do; I feel it happening. It took that long for me to do this rewrite. It took those eight years. It’s great. You know, plays are living things. Sometimes they don’t happen overnight; sometimes they take a long time.

CMR: Just briefly—what has changed in those eight years?

MG: I grew up. I wouldn't say I was immature before, but I know so much more about life—my heart's been broken a couple of times, you know. When I was writing the play, I would say, I didn't understand who my father was, and now I get it. I get why he made the choices he made. Now I feel like I understand who my grandfather was even more deeply. I can see the choices he made—and that you really only get from age, there's no other way. Some people get it early, some people don't, and some people never get it. I'm glad to have figured some of that out.

CMR: That's great.

MG: Yeah.

CMR: So, sweet release for you, but has your family seen the show? And what have their reactions been?

MG: My father saw the show, and his reaction at intermission was, "Tell the actors to stop making fun of me." And he meant it. So he wanted me to go around there and tell the actors—and I said, "You know, well, they've already learned the lines, so we can't change the lines. [Laughs] Because the show is on..." The director at the time came to him and saw him very upset and said, "They redeem you in the second act." In the second act he cried. He was very moved by it. I wouldn't say he got a sweet release—this character in the play is definitely not my father, this is a fictitious character. The rest of my family has not seen the play. I want them to see it. I think if they see it, then a conversation can be had about these things because we don't talk about them. It's very hard. But it's not like they're trying not to see it. They live in California, they live far away, and they don't take planes, so [Laughs]—

CMR: All kinds of obstacles!

MG: [Laughing] That's right, that's right. Oh, yeah. That's them.

CMR: So this is the last question—and it's a fun one. If you could only listen to one bit of Blues for the rest of your life, what or who would it be?

MG: It would actually be... Bessie Smith.

CMR: Bessie Smith.

MG: I would actually pick Bessie Smith, and it would be a song that I can't remember the name of... There's a song that she sings where she describes her genitalia as being "so good it makes a man sick for it." Lovesick for it. It's so genius because she does it in a way that at first you go, "Oh my God"—and then you realize how beautiful it is. Then it goes even deeper than that because it's so poetic: she's actually talking about her own confidence. I like it because Bessie Smith lived at a time when women were low on the totem pole, and she empowered herself through her own physical prowess. She's a champion to me. I know when people think of the Blues they think of these men. Oscar's a man, but for me this play is—the women are gods.

CMR: The women are gods.

MG: The women are gods. And I feel that way about the Blues, too.

CMR: That's beautiful. Thank you so much for blessing us with your magic, Marcus.

MG: Thank you, Cat.