

Weird Sister

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BY NINA PURO | DECEMBER 18, 2015 · 11:00 AM

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Culture Shifts & Switches in Khadijah Queen’s New Play, Non-Sequitur

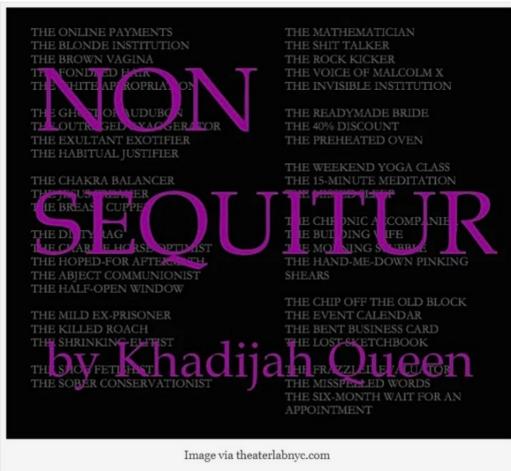


Image via theaterlabnyc.com

Khadijah Queen’s new play “Non-Sequitur,” winner of the 2014 [Leslie Scalapino Award for Innovative Women Performance Writers](#), is a cutting rearrangement of stereotypes surrounding desire, identity politics, and the ways in which perception mediates relationships, delivered via shifting characters (often entities) lobbing short lines. Character examples include “THE BLONDE INSTITUTION,” “THE BROWN VAGINA,” “THE 40% DISCOUNT,” “THE EXULTANT EXOTIFIER,” and “THE WEEKEND YOGA CLASS.”

The result is a mordant, slapstick skewering whose main mechanism is the multiplicity of identities and channels of communication in the late-capitalist racist world—particularly the art world—and an exploration of how fucked and unsurprising these representations invariably shake out to become.

Director Fiona Templeton’s performance group The Relationship is [presenting the play at Manhattan’s Theaterlab from December 12th through 20th](#). The cast members’ characters change each scene and are often abstract or conceptual, suggesting that identities—and bodies—are disposable and replaceable: one’s interior and exterior signifiers and intuited understanding of the world mutate and are inherently multiple. Regardless, for the most part, the oppressors continue to take all the things and everyone operates on a careening, unstable base but tries hard to be a little better and to love each other.

In the accompanying book ([Non-Sequitur, Litmus Press, 2015](#)), Queen notes that “being African-American often demands a certain degree of performativity” for one’s safety or livelihood. The seven-member cast—which Queen notes can and should vary—is, in this performance, comprised of folks who present as one middle-aged white woman, one middle-aged Asian woman, and five black people of various ages and genders. The set is a white raised runway reminiscent of austere art galleries about 6’ high, situated diagonally in a room in Midtown’s indie-theater district. The runway is fringed at one end with a doorway enclosing a fabricated private area. At the other end, narration commences and collapses from a square high-backed wooden seat: a pulpit/ altar/ coffin/ oracle stool/ podium/ waiting area.



Performance still courtesy of The Relationship

Rows of white folding chairs are arranged around the runway. A white supportive column in the center of the runway becomes a prop and an impediment: a navigational pull, a stumble-block for awkward body language or alpha-beta brushes while navigating public spaces, a lean-to, a mast, a symbol of support and of precarity.

I was moved because Queen’s work expresses familiar valances and questions better than I’ve been able to: debt, trying harder, misapplied subjectivity, the commerce in sexuality, “revolutionaries,” internal monologues, world-building, the multiplicity of personas, the blurring of public and private, self-doubt, frustration, complacency, the vagueness in white protest—“THE BEAT POET,” “THE ROCK-KIKER,” “THE HABITUAL JUSTIFIER.”

Within this range of identities, building a family often occurs via approximation, failure, threat, systematized gaps, subcultures, diaspora. These static gaps between scenes felt to me as real as the scenes, akin to culture-shifting in everyday life. The lights going black weren’t traditional graceful segues into another dreamscape or transitions with chapter names or title cards. They were lived transitions: commutes, panic attacks, culture-shifts, rooms collapsing into rooms, heavy breathing in sleep—switches flipping *in* the brain, not just outside it.



Performance still courtesy of The Relationship

Thus the gaps are mitigated, explained, sold, retold. Queen situates interiority in often-overlooked gestures: we in the anthropocene exist in animal fear when alone & in codified, threatened space when the mask gets winched on. Yet within this mutation there’s an exultance that, in me, too easily turns to bitterness. Queen’s work is imbued with a joy that felt useful. This performance made it worth slogging to Midtown during SantaCon for the first time in a month. Yes, really.

Bodies were never not raced and typed, were never free of commerce, as bodies never are: the characters “THE SIX MONTH WAIT FOR AN APPOINTMENT,” “THE TIGER MOM,” and “THE EVALUATION” almost had a fist-fight. Yet in many senses, conflict points held at their core a bemused wink rather than capitulating to resentment or frustration—easier reactions, but more toxic. The overlapping bursts of identities became almost transcendent: the computation of cultures—in my X you and I fit like Y—mapped the spreadsheet I am searching for my square on when interacting with anyone I don’t trust. Seeing it expressed in person was hilarious.

If you’re in New York before the 20th, I highly encourage you to go.

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