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THE ARTS



Solitary Sojourner:
Glenda Dickerson

By Vera J. Katz

These lines from the poem "Bound North Blues" speak of Glenda Dickerson, the solitary sojourner, as she travels through the past of her ancestors to the present of her drylongso folk; ever-exalting, glorifying and praising the history and contributions of her culture with passion, boldness and eloquence.

Dickerson, an alumna of Howard University,¹ has dedicated herself to replacing the cultural stereotypes, to redeeming, retrieving and reclaiming the grand archetypes that are embodied and preserved in the myths, tales and folklore of African Americans. As she walks through language, music, choral chants, ritual and memorabilia, she ignites each with the searing energy of beauty, power and truth.

Welding together poetry, her African American heritage, and drama, she creates a new form that will expose the young to "a fine history of a noble people." Ignited by her familial grandmothers, Ada Taminia Kilpatrick, and Ruth Harris Sanders (who "taught me a respect for the rejuvenating powers of the EARTH . . . They could make me see a picture when they described a situation."),² scorched by the poetry of the Harlem Renaissance era, and polished by two such mentor trailblazers as Owen Dodson and Eleanor Traylor, Dickerson has already given the American theatre a large body of incredibly original and exciting work.

In her undergraduate days at Howard's Department of Drama during the '60s, she stood out as a performer in such fine plays as *Arms and the Man*, *Happy Journey*, *Air Raid*, and *Medea in Africa*. Her memorable teachers were James Butcher, Ted Shine, and Owen Dodson. The latter directed Dickerson and wrote the libretto for Mark Fax's³

Road, road, road, road

.....
 On that north bound road
 Road in front of me
 Nothing to do but walk
 Road in back of me
 Walk and walk and walk
 I wish I had a good friend
 To come along and talk

—Langston Hughes

opera, *Till Victory Is Won*, affording her an opportunity to tour Bermuda.

As a member of the Howard Players, some of her peers were Charles Bettis, Helmar Cooper, St. Clair Christmas, Kenneth Daugherty and Cornel Talley. "We were all building icons of what we'd like to be and then climbing into and trying to fill them up. Of course this was probably due to Mr. Dodson, who was a larger-than-life character. But he was an authentic genius, a more brilliant talent than ever before because he possessed a unique vision."

Life outside the Department of Drama during those years, 1962–1966, Dickerson says, "did not exist for me. It was a rarified, incubator period for me . . . all consuming. You went to class, went to rehearsal, held discussions about theatre in the Green Room, went home to bed, and then it all began again the next day."

It wasn't until the summer of 1968, while on a study tour in London through the University of Saskatchewan, that she fully realized how firmly Mr. Dodson had implanted the Greek heroines into her consciousness. "The Canadian students

couldn't get over how I knew the Greek Theatre characters and their trees just as if they were members of my own family! Mr. D had a gristy way of doing those lectures so that they [the characters], became the people next door. We had to identify pages and pages of quotes and never missed a one. He loved the language. For me, language continues to be the most important element that *must* be in any vehicle for the stage."

This was followed by her founding, in 1967, of the New Toby Players, a touring company whose initial production of *Pride and Poetry* was well-received. She eventually reshaped the group (which later toured schools, colleges and theatres) into the Owen Dodson Lyric Theatre. The company's repertoire includes *Black Thunder* (the story of Gabriel Prosser) *Cypress Trees*, and *Strong Men* (Sterling Brown's poetry), *The Lion in Winter*, and other original conceptions.⁴

After earning a master's degree from Adelphi University in 1969, she brought her varied experiences to Howard and taught until 1972. As a faculty member of the Department of Drama, Dickerson was outstanding as an adaptor-director-educator with such productions as *The Unfinished Song*⁵ (1969), *El Hajj Malik* (1971), *Torture of Mothers* (1971)⁶, and *Trojan Women* (1972). She refers to this period of creativity as her " 'miracle plays.' Though based upon myth, these plays do not simply enact myth but use history, culture, literature, symbols, dreams and inspirations. Their purpose is to help us to remember, to delve, and to enable us to climb."

Emblazoned by Zora Neale Hurston, whom she credits for her discovery of the New Negro Theatre in "the jukes and cabarets," she imaginatively created *Jump At The Sun* (1972, Washington, D.C. Theatre Lobby), an adaptation of

Their Eyes Were Watching God. When remounted at the Lorraine Hansberry Theatre in San Francisco, in 1984, the *San Francisco Examiner* stated: "The mime work is exceptional and Dickerson has directed the great storm scene so that it becomes a stunning dance of survival."

These productions seared with enlarged moments where time was used, as it is in church, raising the audience to a feverish crescendo of call and response. These shows dazzled with their visual decoration of costumes, textures, makeup and hair ornamentation. (Corn rows, extensions and layering of clothing appeared here long before they became popular fashion).

In new and memorable manner, Dickerson combined movement and the Word, the spoken and the sung, the symbol through usage of a kinetic prop (i.e., the pounding of an African rod — that great staff of truth), and the fantastical set piece (a slowly descending elevator revealing a completely gilt-covered Helen caught in its prison-like bars; a Posiedon rising from the foam-covered pit).

Aby abetted by such designers as Quay Truitt (costumes), Ron Truitt (sets and lights) and Ron Anderson (sets), she would demand splendor and grandness; creating stunning and lasting visions.

A coterie of actors and dancers eagerly followed Dickerson from show to show. It is important to list them for many are well-known today and continue to utilize crafts and talents that Dickerson, the divining rod, passed onto them. They include: Debbie Allen-Nixon, Charles Augins, Clyde Barret, Charles Brown, David Cameron, Breana Clarke, Helmar Cooper, Kenneth Daugherty, Clinton Turner Davis, Lee Dobson, Lynda Gravatt, the late Bernie Gibson, Meachie Jones, Petronia Paley, Alva Petway, Phylicia Rashad, Amii Stewart, Connie Thomas, and Lynn Whitfield.

Jesus Christ Laid Today (1971, African-American Theatre, Washington, D.C.), *Torture of Mothers* (1971, Back Alley) and *Owen's Song* (1976, Kennedy Center — conceived and directed with Mike Malone), shot sparks throughout the theatre scene in the nation's capital, attesting to the presence and viability of the African American community. And national critics praised her work. On her part, though, Dickerson would rather

"whose extraordinary standards of excellence have inspired generations of dancers and actors to excel beyond themselves."

In 1973, Dickerson became the first chair of the Department of Drama at the new Duke Ellington High School for the Performing Arts in Washington, D.C. Here she conceived and taught a seminal course in "Adaptation of Myths, Legends and Other Sources to Folk Drama." This was to be the swirling thrust of Dickerson's

There is an ever present mystery to the personal side of Glenda Dickerson, the enigma that never reveals itself in order to hold onto its purity of self.

son's life by the time she left the school in 1976. Later, at Rutgers University/Mason Gross School of the Arts (1981-83), she again explored these topics. In her classes, she espoused "a theatre where the repetition of theme speaks to a people and, with no fourth wall, encourages the participatory experience. This non-polemical theatre inspires the audience to peak together in a catharsis, creating a communion and an evening of fellowship, which results in unification of the Black community."

In the early years, the Ancient Greek theatre, with its intermesh of ritual and catharsis, provided written texts for both Owen Dodson and his disciple, Glenda Dickerson. Later, the Bible with its stories of Jesus and the Prodigal Son⁷ would claim Dickerson's creative attention and successfully illuminate her stage. The Egyptian tale of Isis and Osiris (predating both the Greeks and the Bible) has continued to magnetize her. From it, she fashioned *Magic and Lions* (1977 Women's Interart, N.Y.) for which she received Audelco's Best Director Award. Thus, clearly moving away from interest in the well-made play form, Dickerson now stakes her claim as "a praise-singer of African tradition; that is one who is

a guardian of the archetype of her culture's collective unconscious."⁸ Always transferring her life awareness to the stage, she collaborated and appeared with Marc Primus in *Praise Singer*; a soulstory for two voices, (1987, Richard Allen Cultural Center, N.Y.).

Tar Baby, developed from an essay by Eleanor Traylor, was produced by SUNY at Stony Brook, where Dickerson taught from 1983 to 1988. This represents another example of her exploration of folklore in new and different ways, her obsession with the metaphoric vision, and her affection for the spoken word. An avid reader, especially of Black writers and of the world epics, she states: "I want to take the magic out of books and put it on the stage."

Her own words, strongly selected, sometimes sizzle outwards in every direction, reminding one of the pipe cleaners of many electric colors that were woven through prophetic Cassandra's hair in her production of *The Trojan Woman*.

She quotes; repeats for emphasis; revels; sighs; clicks and clacks; rears her head; amazes at words and analogies; groans over new stories; whispers over paintings; reverses photographs and artifacts. They are all food for her creative mind. "My inspiration," she says, "comes from those old-time words." Her velvet voice alternates between poetry and literature. She purrs with her lusty love of language as she lifts her graceful but strong arms in a wide circle gesture. The sparkling large dark eyes glisten and gleam. These striking qualities of actor/storyteller have been revealed to audiences in Dickerson's first one-woman touring show: *Saffron Persephone Brown* — the flower storm of an archetypal brown woman. Currently, she is "spreading lies" — in a touring show of the same name.

There is an ever present mystery to the personal side of Glenda Dickerson, the enigma that never reveals itself in order to hold onto its purity of self. She clutches hard with determined dedication to a uniquely individual point of view of that which theatre needs to address. A tireless rehearsaler and a perfectionist, she has, on occasion, unfairly earned a "difficult" reputation. Yet this solitary sojourner has continuously dared to display excellent fireworks and detailed beauty which leaves the audience wrenched and enthralled.

There is another role that Dickerson plays besides her work in the theatre and her position as chair of Rutgers University's Theatre/Television Department/Newark campus. And that role is that of a mother. Gusty and long laughter lilt from her as she speaks of her 17-year-old daughter, Anitra Yalode. "Her name in Yoruba means 'mother come again' . . . the nurturing instinct is the strongest aspect of my personality. When my daughter was born, I saw that every woman is extended backwards into her mother and forwards into her daughters . . . This realization has strengthened my relationship with my own mother, who also is dedicated to creating beauty around her in her environment . . ."

"When I played Andromache,⁹ who is eternally pregnant, I was reminded of the life-affirmation/forgiveness of the African-American people — and of woman! . . . I am a woman-centered creative artist, a womanist (in contrast to a feminist) and I praise Alice Walker for giving us that definition.¹⁰ But more importantly, I consider myself a praise-singer!"

A single parent, long before that term became fashionable, Dickerson has found some males in professional theatre unsympathetic to the demands of raising a new life. Mothering has given her life a shape and encouraged her "to dig that worm for Anitra, who is my nourishment!" Dickerson's interest in all aspects of womanhood has continuously surfaced in such productions as *Torture of Mothers* (which she hopes to redirect as a living-newspaper in the near future), Judi Ann Mason's *Daughters of the Mock* (1978-79, Negro Ensemble Company (NEC), where Dickerson was resident director) and J.E. Franklin's *Black Girl* (1987, Second Stage). The poetry and playwriting of feminist Alexis De Veaux have inspired two of her productions: *A Season To Unravel* (1978, NEC) and *No* (1983, Woodie King's New Federal Theatre.) Mel Gussow of the *New York Times* raved that "as adaptor and director, she [Dickerson] unifies a company linked with their author in a community of shared commitment."

Winnie Mandela, the archetype of nurturers, inspired Dickerson to create *Every Step I Take* (1986). Emanating from class improvisations on politics at SUNY/Stony Brook, this production utilized the chant of South African women picketing a prison where Mrs. Mandela

was incarcerated: "You have touched a rock when you have touched a woman!"

Most recently, at Rutgers/Newark, Dickerson illuminated Maxine Hong Kingston's powerful book, *The Woman Warrior* (1989), by shining the lights of the stage on the many shades of the female students. Seeing women as nurturers, she believes, results in seeing "woman as saving/healing this planet. Those of us who are working in Black Theatre are emissaries to get to that



light."

Speaking in analogies as Dickerson is wont to do, she often is reminded of her own nurturing — not only through people but through places. The daughter of an army colonel, she was born in Texas but lived abroad in Germany and Japan, from the age of four. Later, home was Virginia, Oklahoma, Kansas, Ohio, New York, and Maryland. Her love for travel has brought her to the Carifesta International Arts Festival in Barbados (1982). Here she presented an original folktale, *The Golden Stool*. The next year, Rutgers awarded her a study grant to research myths and rites in Senegal. In 1984, she was in Barbados for the National Association for Theatre of Gender. At the 1985 U.N. Decade on Women's Conference in Nairobi, she offered another original work, *Spreading Lies*.

Her own ability to write is again demonstrated in a primary article, "The Cult of True Womanhood: Toward A Womanist Attitude in African-American Theatre."¹¹ She begins the second paragraph: "Today I want to talk about some of my Grandma's stories." Crediting the gifted Eleanor Traylor with linking Grandma-say to today's fashionable

words: "cultural transmission," it is apparent how this [Traylor] outstanding scholar-educator in Afro-American literature and drama has been a strong mentor to Dickerson. "To render the actual in extraordinary terms and thereby to make splendid in language and, therefore, to record" is a line that appears in Traylor's definitive article, "Two Afro-American Contributions to Dramatic Form."¹² Though here describing the writing of William Wells Brown, this line aptly applies to what Dickerson's life in art has been dedicated. Here is what Traylor says about Dickerson's work: "Often negotiating very tight spaces, as say, that between a mediocre script containing a fresh dramatic idea and the possibility of capturing that idea . . . into a brand new dramatic event, Miss Dickerson is one of the few directors willing to take that risk. She will knead the script, provide the fullest scenarios, bring it to the stage, ask us to run it through the alembic of our imaginations, and take our judgment . . . That is courageous. That is brilliant!"

The poem by Langston Hughes, which was quoted at the beginning of this article, concludes: *On that northbound road, these Mississippi Towns, Ain't fit for a hoppin' toad.*

Such towns — and like minds, KKK, Howard Beach, etc. — must continue to hear the truth. They are afraid of anger on stage and get embarrassed when the truth is exposed. "It is not our shame. It is their shame. I am still here and will continue to tell those stories. When there are only two, then it must be said by one to the other," believes Dickerson.

A caring teacher, she is at present attempting at Rutgers/Newark "to make world citizens out of the generation we are raising." She trains her students by getting them "to reveal themselves to themselves, to sty in touch with themselves, to break down their assumptions, and finally to shock even themselves."

When working with videotape, she aims towards getting her students "to find a way to do more socially-conscious material; to make a change through the skills they accrue in both theatre and television in order to use these media in a different way."

In training African American artists in particular, she is dedicated to getting them "to tap into their own natural resources yet to function in the mainstream." She says: "They need to ex-

press themselves from their deepest place, unafraid of failing. They need a place to fail so they are not afraid to try — so they can change the world!"

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In recent years, Dickerson has supported non-traditional casting by directing two noteworthy scenes, and chairing a stimulating panel at the first symposium on the subject in New York City in 1986, and at a Conference in Washington, D.C. in 1987. Just this January, she served on the planning committee of the second symposium entitled "Non-Traditional Casting: The Continuing Challenge" in New York. "Non-Traditional Casting provides an opportunity for the American Stage to reflect the rich diversity that makes our country unique in the world. To open up the boundaries, allowing more voices and sensibilities to be heard, makes us all better off. I believe in cultural pluralism and the enrichment it can bring to the American Theatre." Yet it is imperative that the homework, the research be done when approaching the non-traditionally cast play so that there is "the proper respect and sensitivity," and in order to insure that the history is accurate and the prospective unbiased. Dickerson observes: "There is enrichment in doing this homework and in reshaping the canon. The only indigenous form of American theatre is based on plantation drama, ditties, jubilees, minstrels, jokes, etc. We are responsible for the American Musical Comedy. That is the only form that sprang up from the roots. Everything else is imported. So we become insulted when the approach is to let us join them, rather — we want our original contribution acknowledged."

Of the more known artists that Dickerson has directed: Roscoe Lee Brown, Esther Rolle and Cicely Tyson, in *American Reflections: The Bicentennial*, at historic Harpers Ferry, produced by the Smithsonian Institution. At Avery Fisher Hall, she navigated *A Salute To The Arts*, which honored Carmen De Lavallade, Patti LaBelle, Lionel Hampton, Geoffrey Holder, among others. On Broadway, there was *Reggae*, with Phillip Michael Thomas. Other well-known names: Angela Davis and Alice Walker are individually collaborating with Dickerson on works-in-progress for the stage. Television in Washington, D.C., has seen her work in *Wine In The Wilderness* (WRC: Emmy nomination,

1973), and *For My People* (WTOP: Peabody Award, 1973).

The theatres for which Glenda Dickerson has directed scatter throughout this land: Ford's Theatre in Washington, D.C. — *The Unfinished Song* (1970); Paul Allen's Black American Theatre in Washington, D.C. — *El Hajj Malik* (1971); Arena Stage of Washington, D.C. — a Black Writers Project, in collaboration with Zeldia Fichandler, (1975); Circle In The Square of New York — *Bones* (1978), by Earl Monroe, (a basketball musical); Seattle Repertory Company — *Boesman and Lena* (1979); the Hansberry-Sands Theatre in Milwaukee — *Rashomon*, (an original adaptation, set in Ethiopia 1982).

Yet Dickerson dreams of "a place where the traditionally voiceless can find a sympathetic atmosphere to go and, through the workshop process, hear the readings of new ethnic voices, the time to nurture a piece over the years rather than hustling our work into production long before it is ready, therefore insuring failure." She dreams of a place where new material, by and about women, can be developed. "There are many images already in my mind that I am interested in exploring in front of an audience," she says.

Her never ending goal is "to find a form that addresses itself particularly and specifically to African American people. Any event that reveals to us in any way some aspect of the mystery of human existence on this planet becomes universal." Testimony to her form-searching was in evidence in *Eel Catching in Setauket: A Living Portrait of a Community Past and Present* (1988, produced by SUNY/Stony Brook's Department of Theatre Arts and the Three Village Historical Society).

"My duty, my role is to keep alive the myths, the legends, the moires, the anger, the pain, the fear that our people have suffered on this planet, to never let it be forgotten, to be Cassandra in every form, if need be; that is my obligation! To bring a shape and a focus to these kinds of stories, a fruition to these fables — gives me a satisfaction that commercial plays do not give me. For here, the creative process continues *after* opening night through the unpredictability of the audiences and the actor, through the discoveries of the company functioning together as a community."

She continues: "It is so important that we have our own theatre so we don't have to hush up; in order to cut away some of that self-consciousness [rather than] to have to explore ourselves right in front of the larger culture. Here we could give voice to new visions, new reflections, and new cleansings. Here the audience could go away with a brighter light than they came in with."

The sizzling energy and flames that every Glenda Dickerson production displays have already done exactly that, and most certainly will continue to do so. □

Vera J. Katz is a professor at Howard University's Department of Drama. She has written a shorter version of this article for the March-April issue of *Black Mask* magazine.

References

- ¹ In 1987, Dickerson received the Distinguished Alumni Award from the College of Fine Arts.
- ² The quotations by Ms. Dickerson are from three audio tapes of interviews: a) Interview in New York City by Taquiena Boston and Vera J. Katz (9/81); b) Interview in New York City by Katz (6/87); c) Interview in Maryland by Katz (12/89).
- ³ Mark Fax (composer) was a professor in the Department of Music from 1947-1974.
- ⁴ In 1980, Audelco honored the group by presenting to Dickerson a Special Award for Excellence.
- ⁵ This production earned an American College Theatre Festival Award and a special citation from the Mayor of Washington, D.C., in 1970.
- ⁶ Redone by Dickerson in 1973 in North Philadelphia to aid in reducing gang wars.
- ⁷ *The Prodigal Son* (1970), Howard University.
- ⁸ Theatre Journal, Spring 1988. *The Cult Of True Womanhood: Towards a Womanist Attitude in African-American Theatre*.
- ⁹ In the Owen Dodson Lyric Theatre production of *The Trojan Women*, 1980, directed by Dickerson, Howard University.
- ¹⁰ *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens*, by Alice Walker, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Publishers, 1983.
- ¹¹ Theatre Journal, Spring 1988.
- ¹² The Theatre of Blackamericans Vol. 1, *Roots and Rituals/The Image Makers - A Collection of Critical Essays*, edited by Errol Hill, Prentice Hall, 1980.

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