SignatureTheatre

Presents
A World Premiere Play

THE COMEUPPANCE

Written By
Branden Jacobs-Jenkins

Directed By
Eric Ting

Photo by Emilio Madrid of (from left) Shannon Tyo, Bobby Moreno, Caleb Eberhardt, Susannah Flood, and Brittany Bradford.

STUDY GUIDE

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INTRODUCTION

The Comeuppance

In *The Comeuppance*, a self-proclaimed “Multi-Ethnic Reject Group” reconvenes for the first time in years to pregame for their twentieth high school reunion. Over alcohol and other such substances, they try to reconnect who they once were with who they’ve each become.

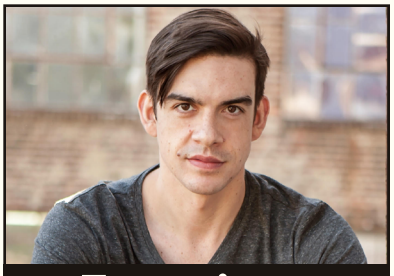
Characters

Emilio

Ursula

Caitlin

Kristina



Francisco (Paco)

A CLOSER LOOK

An Interview with Playwright Branden Jacobs-Jenkins

Excerpted from a 2014 interview between Branden Jacobs-Jenkins and Signature Theatre.

How did you get your start in the theater?

I "acted" mostly. "Acted" with scare quotes. In high school. I wasn't very good. I played Philostrate in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, which is the absolute worst part in the play, because you're basically someone's personal assistant, you're only in the first and last scene, and you have like six incredibly boring lines. My first "big lead" was The Leading Player in *Pippin*, which wasn't actually a lead because I shared the role with three other guys and was sort of the Kelly Rowland of that particular Destiny's Child. And then my senior year I did Vladimir in *Waiting for Godot*, which was a disaster. Our largest audience was six people, and I would be sitting there under a weird papier-mache tree pretending to pee, delivering all these elliptical lines so pretentiously, like "I'm doing Art right now, people!!!" I remember the lights going down at the end of our final performance and hearing my dad in the audience whispering, with relief, "Thank God."

Awful. What was your first exposure to professional theater?

Coincidentally, my first experience of "professional theater" was, um, another version of *Waiting for Godot*, which ran at Studio Theatre in DC (where I grew up) sometime in the 90s. In fact, I have this weird feeling my high school director was thinking about this production when we did it, because it had been a kind of local controversy. Two black actors had been cast in the lead roles and they—along with the director—had managed to sort of "racialize" Beckett in this bizarre way, slightly tweaking some of his language with dialect and adding a certain... I don't know what... to the physical "bits." All sorts of people freaked out, in as much as you can freak out about the theater, and I think my father must have read about it in the newspaper or something and was like, "We should go to this." Of course, my parents instantly fell asleep. I think they'd expected a clown show and not this moderately opaque piece of existentialist drama slightly troubled with colorblind casting—but I was completely riveted. I

mean, I had no idea what I was looking at, but it was doing something to me. In fact, in some ways, I think I still chase that feeling when I go to the theater—not knowing what exactly I'm looking at, but feeling it affect me. And also the "race-blind" concept was rubbing up against all these questions of being and language and modernity and abstraction in a strange way that I was probably responding to on some subconscious level.

And when did you start writing plays?

Well, for a long time, I wrote short stories and poetry, then I had this really traumatic moment at Princeton, when I brought this story in to a creative writing class about two brothers dealing with a schizophrenic parent and there was this moment, after the initial critique was over, when my professor—this very famous novelist—sort of leaned forward and was like, "Um... so I have a question. What race are these characters?" And I was so confused. I had no idea what to do with that. I guess I hadn't "marked" their race in the telling of the story—which was from the first person—but, in my reading experience, I'd never seen anyone write, "Jane Eyre, who was white." I remember in that moment thinking, "Oh no. There is an anxiety that people deal with when they read my work because they know I'm black. And there is an expectation placed on me to deal with that anxiety." Or something.

And I was so traumatized that I couldn't take any more fiction classes, so I took a playwriting class, because it felt like those questions of who was what could be answered later, though now of course I look back on all those works and see that I was cleverly avoiding the issue—setting things in "racially neutral" workplaces, using stock characters, or messing with form in some strange way—like making the theater itself talk or structuring the whole thing like a spelling bee. If I look back on it, I was always questioning form. Form was always a character to me.

So that all happened and then I had this really intense moment with my professor, who said to me near the end of our class, "I think you're a playwright and I think you should deal with that and I'll talk to you tomorrow." I remember going back to my apartment and feeling my life change. Suddenly, playwriting was a real option for my future or something? And I felt this intense obligation to learn everything about theater, ever.

A daunting task.

It was a daunting task, but I took it very seriously. I took one of my first playwriting classes with Neal Bell and the first thing we did was read *Red Cross* by Sam Shepard, which I actually teach in my own classes today. When you teach that play to students, you can diagnose immediately where they are in terms of grasping structure, and what they want from theater. I think that play is amazing. But I remember everyone else being like, "I don't get it." At the end of the year Neal said, "I think you should keep writing plays. You're doing something really complicated." I found a lot of solace in the word "complicated." That somehow it was okay to be messy, okay to wrestle in your plays with a million things.

It's true, you're always operating on multiple levels in your work.

Right. So I applied to write a full-length play for my thesis, but I was an anthropology major. Within my anthro studies though, I was very much into performance studies. I took a class called On Literature and Culture about reading texts in order to discuss culture but also as relics of culture. It was about literature as a culturally located idea. I was obsessed with ideas of appropriation and value and race and Americanness.

But you hadn't yet written about race, or really engaged with those issues in your work, right?

Well around this time I took a class with Daphne Brooks on African American theater. I was suddenly curious about blackness in the theater and what that was. The first thing she said, which was very provocative, was, "There are two places I could've started this class. I could've started with minstrelsy or with *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. I'm choosing *Uncle Tom's Cabin.*" Her point had to do with the idea of a canon. A lot of the narrative of the class had to do with what she taught and what she didn't.

Later, after getting my MA in Performance Studies from NYU, I started writing and thinking about laughter too. Freud has this book called *The Joke and Its Relationship to the Unconscious*, which is partly a study of the "tendentious joke," a joke in which there is a target. He posits that there's a relationship between the joker, the audience, and the object of ridicule, and that ultimately what's at stake is the audience. Somehow laughter gives you currency if you can throw it on something else. I was reading it in relationship to Dave Chappelle's then-recent breakdown and was writing about contemporary theatrical ideas of the "wrong" laughter. And, at one point, I realized I was the only person in this department of fifty-five people who was African American who studied theater. Everyone else was doing music or dance. My advisor told me, "Well, the truth is that theater begins for African Americans in a place of shame. It begins in minstrelsy, with an idea of blackness." He was right—the first appearance of blackness in the theater was face paint.

Which might explain why your teacher Daphne "skipped over" minstrelsy.
Right. Because if you're actually going to talk about theater in America and blackness, you have to start in a place of debasement. The only indigenous American theatrical form is blackface minstrelsy; you can argue musical theater, but that has roots in operetta and other things. There's an amazing book by Eric Lott called *Love and Theft* that talks about minstrelsy's origins, which was actually a big inspiration for *Neighbors*; that was my first full-length play.

A CLOSER LOOK

An Interview with Director Eric Ting

How did you find your way to theater, and to directing specifically?

I came to theater relatively late (it was my junior year in college when I saw my first play—*Annie*, the musical, but that's another story). ANYWAYS. The experience grabbed me, and I seized an opportunity to take a class in the drama department which, as it turns out, was puppetry, where I often conceived, wrote, constructed, and performed the work. So, my entry into theater was a form where I had complete and utter control over EVERYTHING. So naturally, I became a director. At which point I was quickly absolved of the notion that I had control over anything at all.

A director's work can often feel mysterious — we can't see it in the same way we can see the actors' performances, or the scenic design. Can you tell us how you view the role of a director, particularly on a new play like *The Comeuppance*?

My mom ran a Chinese restaurant in Morgantown, West Virginia for about three decades. I grew up in that restaurant, so when I get asked questions like this, I often think of a sous chef. Branden's the chef, the visionary, and I'm there to make sure all the collaborators are operating in service of the same purpose, to bring this exquisite play into the world and deliver it to audiences. There's a lot of strategizing and prioritizing and nudging that, absolutely at its best, is invisible.

We're taught in schools how to read a novel, but there's rarely a focus on how to read a play, let alone plays still in development. Can you talk us through how you approach reading a play? Are there certain questions you're asking? How do you begin to envision the world of the play off the page and on a stage?

I always read a new play I'm working on twice up front. The first time is to gather what I refer to as the soft response. It's experiencing the play in soft focus—trying to understand the 'why' of it, to capture as much as I can about that first encounter in the way we remember our first time with anything—you don't know what it is when you come to something for the first time, so it becomes about discovery, awe, longing, does my heart leap?

The second time, I take it all apart. It's a dissection of the play—where do I get lost, when do I get confused, oh

my god there are so many typos! Haha. But that second time around is really an interrogation of form and narrative to try and comprehend the 'how' of the play while clinging to 'why.'

You and Branden have known each other for a long time. What's particularly exciting about getting to work together on *The Comeuppance*?

Oh wow. Well, I've known Branden pretty much since I started in the professional theater—he was in my wedding party! I've had the glorious opportunity to workshop early works and direct plays of his, but this is the first world premiere. Branden's work pushes us into unknown territories. And the way he works demands that we make ourselves vulnerable to what lies out there. Some of that is in his writing—he has a way of cracking open moments unexpectedly, so you're caught off guard. And then he's a ferocious re-writer, constantly shaping and re-shaping a moment, an arc, and as a collaborator you have to be able to shift and change with it. It's a challenge in the best of ways to be your best self as an artist.

So much work is done before we even get to first rehearsal. Can you give us a window into your conversations with Branden and the designers leading up to the start of rehearsals? What elements of the play guided your early discussions? Did you conduct any research?

Well, there are elements of this play that feel very personal to Branden—it's not biographical by any means, but there was a clear sense that the constellation of characters in this play drew robustly from Branden's own youth. So, from the beginning we really opened up the design process to Branden's own sense of this place—this front porch—that he would often describe as a liminal space that his friends could gather (without going into anyone's home). We were struck by that, so we leaned into it in such a way that the porch exists in much the same way a memory might—a small island of detail/reality.

You also have an amazing cast! How have you worked with the actors to bring these characters to life?

They really are a stellar ensemble of actors. And the truth is, I've really done very little (which maybe is its own sort of work). So much is in the casting with any play, and when you cast well, the actors, as has been very much the case in *The Comeuppance*, seemingly fall into the characters, wearing them like second skins, fleshing them out in ways that none of us (even Branden) could have imagined. In the way I interrogate the structure of a play, this cast interrogates their characters, and I think it's been a real gift

to Branden's process as these characters have gone from the two dimensions of the page into these so very alive performances. They're stellar.

There are several moments where Death directly addresses the audience. What do those moments signify to you? How have you discussed the presence of Death in the room?

I'm really hoping folks will come to their own answer to this on their own. But we spent a lot of time talking about how our relationship to death shifts as we get older. This is a play about high school friends reuniting 20 years later. So, ask yourselves, what is your relationship to death now? How has that changed for you in the last few years as we've all had to navigate a global pandemic? How might that change in the years to come as life happens around you? Are you comfortable with death? Or is death something that terrifies you? Is death something close or far away?

Are there any questions the play has prompted for you as you delve in deeper to the script?

We've thought a lot about events that happen in our lives that are shared across vast numbers of the population. In *The Comeuppance*, the experience of this group of friends spans 9/11 through the pandemic. When you encounter such a scale of change, it's interesting to see how we're changed by it, and how differently we're changed by it from each other.

Do you have any advice to share with students interested in a career as a theatermaker?

Nurture a practice of curiosity.

UNDERSTANDING THE WORLD OF THE PLAY

ATROPOS

One of the three Greek goddesses of fate and destiny. Atropos would choose the time of a mortal's death by cutting a thread.

AMOKYE

In Akan and Ashanti mythology, Amokye is the woman who guards the entrance to Asamando, or the Land of the Dead.

OGBUNABALI

The Igbo deity of death.

HINE-NUI-TE-PŌ

A giant goddess of death and the underworld in Māori, indigenous Polynesian mythology. She receives spirits once they die.

KUMAKATOK

A group of three robed figures in Filipino mythology believed to knock on doors in the middle of the night and bring bad omens, usually of death.

XOLOTL

An Aztec god of fire and lightning, often depicted as a dog-headed man. Xolotl guides souls of the dead. He is also god of twins, monsters, misfortune, sickness and deformities.

WHO IS DEATH?

Death is often personified in our cultural narratives, with inspirations pulled from mythological, folk, and religious storytelling. Death can be a fierce figure of punishment or a benevolent guide for souls journeying to the afterlife. While each rendering is unique, our communal understanding of Death calls on a rich history dating back thousands of years and countless cultures.

Psychopomp: From the Greek "guide of souls," psychopomps are entities (spirits, deities, or other mythological forces) that guide human souls to the afterlife.

"Hello there. You and I, we have met before, though you may not recognize me. People have a tendency to see me once and try hard to forget it ever happened - though that never works for very long. Perhaps you know me by one of my many names? Amokye? Ankou? Anubis? Atropos? Azrael? Hine-nui-te-pō? Kumakatok? Magwayen? Mot? Muut? Ogbunabali? Owuo? Shinigami? Tarakeshwara? Hei Wuchang? Bai Wuchang? Wuluwaid? Yama? No? Well those are only a handful in living memory. In any case, I should go out on a limb here and assume that no one present is familiar with the term "psychopomp," which is fine, so you may call me, in the meantime, Death." - *The Comeuppance*

MAGWAYEN

Goddess of the sea and the underworld in Visayan mythology.

MARA

A Buddhist demon representing death.

MARO MERGOS

Lithuanian goddess of death, desire and rebirth.

ANKOU

The personification of death in Welsh, Cornish, Breton and certain French folklore. Ankou's most traditional representation is as the grim reaper, wearing a cloak and carrying a scythe.

MUUT

The indigenous Cahuilla mythological messenger of death, often depicted as an owl.

ANUBIS

The ancient Egyptian god of funerary rites, protector of graves, and guide to the underworld. Anubis is usually depicted as a canine jackal or a man with a canine head.

AZRAEL

The Angel of Death in Islam. Azrael transports the souls of the deceased.

SHINIGAMI

Japanese deities that help humans towards death. Shinigami are often seem as monsters and creatures of darkness.

OWUO

The god of death in Asante and Akan mythology in West Ghana. He is often represented by a ladder.

VALKYRIE

A mythological Norse female deity who guides souls of the dead to Valhalla.

TARAKESHWARA

A form of the Hindu god Shiva as he fulfills responsibilities as a deliverer of souls into rebirth.

VANTH

An Etruscan female deity of death and a guide for souls to the underworld. She is often depicted as a benevolent guide.

YAMA

The Hindu god of death and the underworld.

HEIBAI WUCHANG

Heibai Wuchang are two Chinese folk deities charged with escorting sprits of the dead to the underworld. Their names mean black and white impermanence, and one is dressed in black while the other is dressed in white.

WULUWAID

An Australian rain God who also serves as the boatman, ferrying souls of the dead to Purelko, the Aboriginal Australian afterlife.

COLUMBINE HIGH SCHOOL SHOOTING

In 1999, 12th grade students Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold murdered 12 students and one teacher, leaving over 20 additional victims injured at their high school in Littleton, Colorado. Harris and Klebold then committed suicide. At the time, the Columbine shooting was the deadliest mass shooting at a high school in America's history.

BILLBOARD TOP 10 SONGS IN 2003:

1. In da Club – 50 Cent
2. Ignition – R. Kelly
3. Get Busy – Sean Paul
4. Crazy in Love – Beyonce featuring Jay-Z
5. When I'm Gone – 3 Doors Down
6. Unwell – Matchbox Twenty
7. Right Thurr - Chingy
8. Miss You - Aaliyah
9. Picture – Kid Rock featuring Sheryl Crow
10. Bring Me to Life – Evanescence featuring Paul McCoy

AFGHANISTAN WAR

A response to the September 11th attacks, the Afghanistan War officially began in 2001 and lasted until 2021. The first phase of the war consisted of toppling the Taliban, the conservative religious faction ruling Afghanistan that had provided sanctuary for al-Qaeda. The second and third phases aimed to rebuild new state institutions and strengthen defenses against future extremist campaigns. Over the course of 20 years, the Taliban began to reestablish power throughout the country. Following the removal of U.S. troops, the Taliban retook Afghanistan's capital city, Kabul. The Afghanistan War is the longest war in America's history. Nearly 2,500 Americans and 50,000 Afghan civilians lost their lives.

MOST POPULAR PHONE IN '03: NOKIA 1100

AOL INSTANT MESSENGER (HEIGHT OF POPULARITY IN THE EARLY 2000S)

INSTAGRAM LAUNCHES: 2010

JROTC

Established in 1916, the Junior Reserves Officers' Training Course (JROTC) is a federally sponsored training program to equip high school students with leadership skills and military knowledge. While JROTC is not explicitly a recruiting program for military service, it has produced a strong pipeline. As of 2023, JROTC programs are present in over 1,700 schools. While early cadet classes were exclusively made up of white men, contemporary classes are made up of 50% global majority and 40% female identifying students.

JANUARY 6TH CAPITOL ATTACK

2021

On January 6th, 2021, the U.S. Capitol was stormed by a mob of supporters of President Donald Trump following his electoral loss to President-elect Joe Biden. The mob interrupted a joint Congress session convened to certify Biden's electoral win. Over 2,000 rioters entered the building and vandalized, looted and incited violence. The insurrection is widely considered an act of domestic terrorism.

FACEBOOK OPENS TO THE PUBLIC: 2006

2008 BARACK OBAMA ELECTED PRESIDENT

GAY MARRIAGE IS LEGALIZED IN THE U.S.

PARKLAND SCHOOL SHOOTING

On February 14th, 2018, 19-year-old former student Nicholas Cruz opened fired on the students and staff of Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, killing 17 people and injuring 17 others. The Parkland shooting replaced Columbine as the deadliest high school shooting in America. Parkland Students founded Never Again MSD, an advocacy group dedicated to gun control. In 2022, Cruz was sentenced to life imprisonment without the possibility of parole

2020 JOE BIDEN ELECTED PRESIDENT

BILLBOARD TOP 10 SONGS IN 2023:

1. Heat Waves – Glass Animals
2. As it Was – Harry Styles
3. Stay – The Kid Laroi and Justin Bieber
4. Easy on Me - Adele
5. Shivers – Ed Sheeran
6. First Class – Jack Harlow
7. Big Energy - Latto
8. Ghost – Justin Bieber
9. Super Gremlin – Kodak Black
10. Cold Heart (Pnau remix) - Elton John and Dua Lipa

IPHONE DEBUTS: 2007

MOST POPULAR PHONE IN 2023: IPHONE

2000

2000 GEORGE W. BUSH ELECTED PRESIDENT

9/11

The September 11th attacks consisted of four coordinated terrorist attacks executed by the militant group al-Qaeda. Terrorists hijacked four commercial airplanes, crashing two into the World Trade Center twin towers in New York City and one into the Pentagon in Arlington, Virginia. The fourth plane was overtaken by passengers and crashed into a field in rural Pennsylvania. Over 3,000 people were killed in the 9/11 attacks, which launched the counterterrorism campaign coined the "Global War on Terror," and the creation of the Department of Homeland Security.

IRAQ WAR

An extension of the war on terror, the Iraq war began in 2003 and extended into 2011. Joined by other western forces, the U.S. claimed to enter the country to destroy weapons of mass destruction and overthrow the government of Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein. Over one million American military officers served in Iraq. Approximately 4,500 Americans and over 100,000 Iraqi civilians were killed during the war. Conflict and instability continue in Iraq due to the war, including the rise of the al-Qaeda breakaway group ISIS in 2014. U.S. troops returned to Iraq in 2014 to assist in the fight against ISIS. To this day, there is a small presence of U.S. troops in Iraq.

FINANCIAL CRISIS & GREAT RECESSION 2008

2016 DONALD TRUMP ELECTED PRESIDENT

COVID-19 PANDEMIC

2020

Since the emergence of COVID-19 in late 2019, the world has struggled to regain a sense of normalcy. COVID has upended personal and professional routines, social systems, and the global economy. Over one million Americans have lost their lives to COVID-19. Early surges of the virus left hospitals overwhelmed with patients, overexerting health care workers and creating shortages in hospital beds, personal protective equipment, and staff. To limit spread, stay-at-home orders were implemented, and both schools and offices switched to remote options when possible. In 2023, the world continues to adjust to the impact of the virus, though many routine activities have resumed.

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

2022

Rapid advancements in AI, such as ChatGPT, have increased the sense of urgency around understanding the long-term consequences of new technologies. Debates include the ethics and safety of technologies and their impact on everything from generating and manipulating language, ideologies and media (photo and video), to laws, policies, and governmental structures. Conversations have largely shifted away from hypothetical "ifs" towards observational "whens."

2023

BEHIND THE SCENES

An Interview with Actor Caleb Eberhardt

How did you get your start in theater?

My mom was a professional dancer and an educator. She's taught dance at San Francisco State University for most of my life. She grew up in the arts — she did theater, film, and performing arts. She put me in programs and allowed me to develop on my own, and guided me as well. She was my teacher at times.

My 8th grade year I applied to all the high schools I was supposed to apply to. I wasn't the greatest academic student, and I didn't get into any high schools in the Bay Area. My last resort was this performing arts boarding school called Idyllwild Arts Academy. They had scholarship money in the musical theater program. I was leaning towards the interdisciplinary department, but we needed scholarship money. I went up, I auditioned, I got in. That was four years of performing arts education. In the mornings I would do my academics and in the afternoons and nights I would do acting and musical theater.

I'd done theater before, but it wasn't as rigorous as what I learned there. I really learned the beginnings of how to be an actor. Throughout that time, I saw what the upperclassmen were doing to prep for college programs and a professional life in the arts, and I realized that was what I wanted to try to do with my life. By the time I graduated, I was prepared to do that. I knew what colleges I wanted to apply to and all that stuff. That's when I decided I wanted to do it for real. The path was made clear for me. I was like, "Oh, I've just got to train and get really good with my instrument and then find the places that are going to help me do that even more."

What drew you to working on *The Comeuppance?*

I got asked to do the workshop in December. I saw Branden's name in the [email] subject and I was like, "Yes!"

Then I did the workshop. Reading the play and workshopping it for those few days, I immediately felt connected with [my character], Emilio. I went into it blind and then I saw the light. It's just an incredible piece of work.

It's the most challenging play I've done professionally, and that's an exciting thing. Especially at the age I'm at now, I've played a lot of teenagers, and this is the first adult I'm playing. I'm really excited to do that. The intricate arc of [the character] is a challenge. I like a challenge. I definitely don't want things to be too easy.

Are there parts of Emilio that you feel especially connected to? Are there any elements of his personality or experience that you've found more challenging to embody?

I think the biggest challenge with entering into Emilio is that a lot of him is like who I am. Because [his character] is so truthful to who I am, I'm having to dig a little deeper to find what emotions and traits feel the realest.

I'm self-critical – impostor syndrome is real. I think frustration, and anger, are easy emotions for me to find. As I get older, I'm trying to get better at quelling those [emotions], and trying to approach situations that might frustrate me with a bit more patience, awareness, clarity, and articulation, as opposed to just reacting. I think Emilio is pretty reactive, although he is also very articulate. He's an artist, which I also am. I'm not a visual artist, but I make music, as well as act. The creative process is very familiar to me. I love nostalgia. I recognize its beauty, and I also recognize its pain – its capability of making you feel sour, or making you long for things, and maybe you're not ready for those feelings. I feel like I'm capable of holding a grudge. I'm capable of telling a person how I feel if I feel jilted. Emilio's all these things that are human but can be a little ugly sometimes, and he bares it all. He's definitely not perfect, and I am not perfect. I think that's what's exciting about doing this, and also a bit scary. I want to do it justice and present a completely whole and human character on stage, and not give the audience an idea of what Emilio "should" be. I think I can do that because I am so similar to Emilio.

What preparation work are you doing as you develop your character?

One of the first questions [our director] Eric asked us was, "How do you feel about death? Tell us about your experience with death," because Death is a character [in the play], and these characters are dealing with that in their own way.

We're talking a lot about our own memories, and our own nostalgia for our high school years. We talked about where we were when 9/11 happened, we've shared stories about Columbine and the tons of others similar events that have happened since, like when Trump got elected, and the feelings that surround them, and who you might be with when you recollect [these stories]. There's a lot of recollecting going on, which is necessary and fun, but weighted.

Since this is a new play, Branden is making changes to the script throughout the rehearsal process. What's your approach to working on a new play? What's most exciting, and what's most challenging?

The rewrites are a challenge. Not that I haven't experienced that before. I think I'm having a big challenge with it now because I'm in so much of the play, so whenever any page has changed, what I'm doing changes. You get attached to something. whether it be a line, or a choice that's attached to a line, and that line is gone. I'm learning something about myself, which is, I like to be memorized. I like to have the pages out of my hand as soon as possible, but I'm not the greatest memorizer. It's this tug of war.

I think the fun that comes with doing a new play is that you're part of a process and a collaboration that is like history. In school you're given this play that's been that way for a long time. You have the lines, and there's no opportunity for malleability – there's no opportunity for an actor's experience informing something that a character might say. But that happened at one point! Like, when Tennessee Williams was writing *A Streetcar Named Desire* and workshopped it for the first time, that was happening!

With *The Comeuppance*, we're part of that process. So, in 50 years, if they're doing this play again, what they're presenting is based on what we brought to the room. That's a really cool thing to be a part of. I think I realized how cool that was the first time I saw my name in a published version of a play I was in. Despite all the challenges, you're really part of the creation of something new.

Since working on a new play is such a collaborative process, can you tell us more about your collaborators in the room? How do you support one another? What are you learning from each other?

I've been thinking about this all day. I feel like when I'm down on myself, it permeates. You can feel it. Everybody around me has been really supportive. I couldn't ask for a better group of people. I've been in [processes] where the energy is off. That's not happened once here. That was really a tone set from the beginning, and that's awesome.

I also have to stop and realize that everybody else is going through the same thing in their own way. They're all working to learn new stuff. I deal with imposter syndrome, where I feel like the standards I set for myself are what I imagine they have for me. If I don't meet them, I'm like, "They're going to realize that I'm a fraud." I sometimes have to check myself and settle into the energy in the room, which is always joyous and ebullient and ready to just have fun. I think that's something to lean into a bit more, because I know I can be hard on myself. If you can learn not to be hard on yourself earlier in life, then do it!

You've been working with Ann James, an intimacy coordinator, during rehearsals. Can you tell us about your experience working with an intimacy coordinator? How does your work with Ann contribute to your preparations for performance?

I've had to stop and talk to myself, like, "These are tools that actually might benefit you."

"De-role-ing" (getting yourself out of character after a rehearsal or performance) is a concept that is easy to imagine for yourself, but it's the first time I've heard it said like that. At first, I'm like, "But what's that going to do to like the authenticity I bring to the stage?" But then I think about it, and all she's saying is, let it go so it doesn't follow you home. I've definitely had moments in past productions where I thought I let it go, then it followed me home. That's all she's saying – do whatever you've got to do to keep it from following you home. It's not just about being like,

“Okay, it’s over. I’m good.” It’s about doing something physical for yourself, or checking in with your castmates, or just laughing.

I’m still getting used to it. [Ann] was like, “Whenever you get new pages, instead of being like, ‘Oh god, new pages…’ be like, ‘NEW PAGES!!!’” Everybody else is really good at that. Like today, everybody did it and I was just like (tentatively), “new pages…” Everybody was like, “Caleb!” So, I’m learning.

It’s probably because I’ve never had a person in the room like that, who’s encouraged looking at [challenges] with optimism, instead of as a detriment. You’re always going to be learning. You should never assume you know everything, especially in theater and collaboration. You’re always going to learn something.

Rehearsing full days and performing eight shows a week can be exciting, but also exhausting. How do you keep yourself nourished as an artist? Do you have other creative practices, or other passions outside of the arts?

I’ve been working to feed my joy lately. I’ve been trying to find reasons throughout my day to be grateful and be happy that I’m doing what I’m doing. It’s easy to find a lot of reasons to be upset. It’s surprisingly very hard to think of reasons to be happy for what you’re doing, despite all the things that might make it challenging. It’s easy to be pissed about the trains being delayed so that you often forget why you’re on the train in the first place, which is to come to a theater and act for a living.

Also, I like taking pictures. I got into photography last year. Whenever I can find a moment to go out with intent, like, “I’m going out to take pictures.” That’s always great. That always resets me.

Do you have anything else you’d like to share with students interested in a career in the arts? What keeps you here?

Community. The acting and theater community is so fertile and vast that if you can just find your way into some offshoot of that community you will meet people, and meet people, and meet people, and have opportunities to make, and make, and make, and make, and make. Hopefully those people that you meet will push you to try other things and push you to work on the thing you want to do, or push you to take a class. Find the community that feeds the instinct you have to make what you want.

BEHIND THE SCENES

An Interview with Magic Designer Skylar Fox

How did you get your start in theater?

I started doing theater around the same age I started doing magic: when I was four years old. I roped all my friends into doing plays with very elaborate costumes and puppets we'd make. As an adult, I still basically do the same thing.

So many of us love theater for its magic, but few of us know that there are careers in magic design! What was your introduction to magic and illusions work, and how did you go about developing your craft?

I got a magic kit when I was four from my aunt and uncle (shout out Patti and Alan). I asked my parents for a street performing license for my eighth birthday. As I was doing plays with my friends after school, I was working as a magician at birthdays and festivals and even (uh-oh) a Renaissance fair. But magic is something you largely do alone, and in theater, you get to make things with people.

Making things with people is what I love, so as I doubled down on wanting to direct and write plays (and went to college to do so), I thought I'd given up magic. Looking back, I see how, in every show I directed, I was using magic to stage the plays. I never would have called it that! In my mind, that was just putting a story on stage. Then, I was hired as the magic associate for *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child* on Broadway, and that changed everything, and here I am today!

I still direct and write plays, but I've also gotten to reclaim my identity as a magician to support the impossible moments of other people's stories.

What do you think may surprise people about magic and illusions work in the theater?

So much of the work happens before the, "How do we do it?"! I think that's the most important work. We've got to answer the questions:

1. Why is this play meaningful to us?

2. What moments most deeply express that meaningful, vulnerable feeling/idea?

3. How could something impossible happening make those moments more impactful?

This is the deep thinking work that gives theatrical magic its meaning. And you can't fake it! You have to be able to look

yourself in the mirror and believe it.

As a magic designer, what work are you doing before you get into the rehearsal room? Do you have a specific way of approaching the script or conducting research?

You do a lot! You meet again and again with the director and writer and designers, fighting to answer the above questions together. You also need to collaborate to design within the scenic, lighting, costume, and sound needs to make impossible things possible, since those departments will be deep in their work by the time rehearsals start. You need to plan way ahead and be super in-the-moment responsive at the same time, if that makes sense. People who do what I do love to push the limits, so we'll often get ideas before we know exactly how to do them, and then go searching for solutions. Everything from old magic books to YouTube reviews of new technology are useful.

You have a phenomenal crew of collaborators on *The Comeuppance*. How did you work together to define (and support!) the role of magic and illusion in the play?

There is no magic possible without the buy-in and brilliance of everyone on the creative team. I think of my job on a show as organizing the creativity of that team around making impossible things happen. In the case of this show, the team realized they were interested in the texture of magic, and Arnulfo (our scenic designer) reached out. Since then, we've worked together to put a kind of playground for magic on stage, a space that both feels, and is, slippery. They've been so generous in making choices that make my work possible, and so what I can do in return is try to make some really special moments that make it worth it.

This is a new play, and Branden plans on actively rewriting throughout rehearsals and early performances. How do you stay flexible in your work to support a changing script?

One thing is, on this show in particular, we built a lot of flexibility into the design of the world of the play. We knew we'd need to be able to change on a dime, so Arnulfo and Amith (our lighting designer) and I talked a lot about how to maximize possibility. I can't explain that more without giving things away. In tech, and in previews, I fully expect we'll add a magic moment we'd never thought of before, and we'll cut something we were sure of. I have a whole craft kit in the theater and am often making things on the go because someone suggested a great, new idea.

Can you tell us more about the "design" part of your job? How do you go about developing a moment of magic, and how do you practice it? Taking that one step further, how do you teach that moment to whoever needs to execute it, whether that's an actor, a crew member, or another teammate?

I draw, but not well. I also make prototypes out of cardboard and gaff tape and string. I often combine a bunch of magic principles that are thousands of years old with something new and special for the show. While I might try and idea

out, it comes to fruition in rehearsals. I rarely teach an actor to do magic, because truly, we're creating something together that's never been done before. I'm learning as much as they are. But in their performance, we find the truth of the magical moment.

You're also a writer and director in your own right. What has your experience been of working at the intersection of different practices, and are there certain tools in your personal artistic toolbox that you're particularly proud or appreciative of?

I like getting to shift quickly between thinking big picture, like, "What matters most to tell this story powerfully?" and super micro, like, "What if we put some glue right there?" I think doing a lot of different jobs gives me a good deal of empathy and understanding for my collaborators. I really try to be the designer I'd want as a director or writer, and vice versa. I love a process where everyone making a play is all up in each others' business. I love forgetting who came up with what.

Are there any creative exercises you'd like to share with folks looking to dip their toes into the world of magic and illusion?

Think of an impossible moment you'd love to see onstage. If you can't think of one, find a stage direction from a favorite play. Figure out why you'd love to see it, what it means to you. Then start a brainstorm of five different ways to do it. You have to tools! I promise you. If you get stumped, you have something thousands of years of theater-makers didn't: Google. Teller (of Penn & Teller) has a quote I'll paraphrase: Magic is often just someone spending more time and energy on something than you can imagine.

Do you have any additional words to share with aspiring theater artists?

1. Don't give up your weird interests! They're what make your perspective special.

2. Learn how to make things with your own hands. You don't have to be great at it, but it will make you a better collaborator.

3. Whenever you can, make things you believe in with people you love.

DEEPER DIVE

Other Plays by Branden Jacobs-Jenkins

Girls

Everybody*

Gloria*

An Octoroon*

Appropriate*

War

Neighbors

**Available at the New York Public Library*

ABOUT SIGNATURE

A HOME FOR STORYTELLERS. A SPACE FOR ALL.

The Pershing Square Signature Center. Photo © David Sundberg / Esto

Our Mission
Signature Theatre is an artistic home for storytellers. By producing several plays from each Resident Writer, we offer a deep dive into their bodies of work.

What We Do
Signature Theatre is a space for artists and audiences to call home. Signature creates opportunities through the spaces and support it offers the theater community. For playwrights, Signature's unique playwright-in-residence model offers the stability and support of home. For audiences, Signature offers access to all, offering a welcoming creative community and affordable ticketing programs.
Only Signature Theatre offers an immersive journey through a playwright's body of work to theatergoers seeking intimate human connection and extraordinary cultural experiences.

Our History
Signature Theatre was founded in 1991 by James Houghton and its resident playwrights include: Edward Albee, Annie Baker, Lee Blessing, Martha Clarke, Will Eno, Horton Foote, María Irene Fornés, Athol Fugard, John Guare, Stephen Adly Guirgis, A.R. Gurney, Katori Hall, Quiara Alegría Hudes, Samuel D. Hunter, David Henry Hwang, Bill Irwin, Branden Jacobs-Jenkins, Adrienne Kennedy, Tony Kushner, Romulus Linney, Kenneth Lonergan, Dave Malloy, Charles Mee, Arthur Miller, Dominique Morisseau, Lynn Nottage, Suzan-Lori Parks, Sarah Ruhl, Sam Shepard, Anna Deavere Smith, Regina Taylor, Paula Vogel, Naomi Wallace, August Wilson, Lanford Wilson, Lauren Yee, The Mad Ones, and members of the historic Negro Ensemble Company: Charles Fuller, Leslie Lee, and Samm-Art Williams.

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