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DEAD WHITE ZOMBIES

EMMA DANTE

PINKOLANDIA

The logo consists of the letters 'T' and 'F' in a stylized, overlapping font. The 'T' is positioned above and to the left of the 'F', with their right sides overlapping.

DEAD WHITE ZOMBIES, DALLAS TX

BY THOMAS RICCIO



Photo 1: *T.N.B. (typical nigga behavior)*, Spooky (David Jeremiah) a gang banger, with Charleene (Rihanna Mack). Photo: Alisa Levy

The house was on Poe Street, a stunted dead end with six sagging tumbledown houses and two abandoned lots in post-industrial West Dallas. It was here that Dead White Zombies, a Dallas-based performance group, performed *T.N.B. (typical nigga behavior)* in June and July of 2013. [Photo 1]

To the east of the house was a concrete plant churning noise and lime dust; across street lived Castro, a Dominican handyman with a yard full of appliances, scrap metal and feral cats. Next to him was a small house with a porch set on a dirt lot, its front door and windows grated with metal. Surveillance cameras, positioned in trees and on a telephone pole, were focused on the street, porch and yard. This was the local drug delicatessen, selling meth, crack, and weed. The *T.N.B.* house was the former stash house, a place to hold the drugs pending a transaction. A local developer had purchased the house two weeks before rehearsals began and let us use it.

The former owners of the house, the Garcia family, were Mexican-American grandparents with an adult son, Daniel Garcia. When de-installing the performance shortly after its close, there was a banging on the front door.

Seven Dallas Policemen, guns drawn and arrest warrant in hand, were looking for Daniel Garcia. Their 9mm Glocks drawn the police searched the house, cautiously maneuvering around corners and into rooms. A sergeant described Garcia, a convicted felon who was implicated in recent drug related violence, as a “bad guy, a very very violent bad guy.” Our rehearsals were often interrupted by men looking for Garcia—mostly Latino, some African American men, all with hard faces and unmoving eyes. Their late model cars—BMW, Cadillac, and muscle car Dodges, with big spoke wheels and impenetrable tint windows—idled outside. When we told them Garcia had

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moved they invariably asked if we had anything, “you in business?” When we told them we were working on a performance, their heads tilted back with a puzzled, “What did you say?” response.

Behind the *T.N.B.* house was high grass and a weed and rubbish-strewn yard with a shack, fire pit, spent beer cans, and for some unknown reason dozens of women’s shoes. Except for trimming the grass and adding benches and lights, we left it as found art. There were also several marijuana plants around the house, growing happily in the Texas heat. They would bud by the time our performance closed.

A hole in the back fence opened to a gravel and weed lot where audiences would park. Abutting that was the effluvial Babbs Brothers BBQ. The brothers donated collard greens served during the performance. Audiences would enter *T.N.B.* property through the fence hole, vicariously committing a “B and E”, breaking and entering. [Photos 2-3]

West Dallas was a long-neglected industrial and warehouse district just west of gleaming slick downtown Dallas. In the distance the gleam, lights, and glitter sprouted like Oz. West Dallas was the forgotten underside of Big D, founded as a tent city by unemployed World War I veterans, its claim to fame being where Clyde Barrow, of Bonnie and Clyde, lived and shot a lawman.

Today the area is home to the working poor—white, black and Latino—shotgun shacks, mom and pop taquerias, empty storefronts, a fortress-like gun store, carpentry and metal shops, wandering homeless dogs, and economically and psychologically shell-shocked people. The first house we considered for our performance was a gagging nightmare of empty crack vials, used condoms, soiled mattresses, and excrement smeared walls. Although the provenance and layout of the house were perfect, the expense of a hazardous materials cleanup was prohibitive.

In 2007 Trinity Groves was founded as a development company with a vision to revitalize West Dallas. The organization planned to work responsibly with the existing community, local schools, and the city to develop new businesses that would in turn hire unemployed local residents. With the opening of a monumental arching bridge linking downtown to West Dallas in 2012, along with the opening of a microbrewery and innovative restaurants last fall, the area is fast becoming a trendy destination. A few years ago, DWZ and a few other courageous visual artists, saw the post-industrial detritus as beauty full of possibility, an authentic rough among the diamond of Big D.

Boisterous and prosperous Dallas is a city located at the buckle of the Bible Belt. It is the land of retail, headquarters to Neiman Marcus, Mary Kay, and JC Penny, where big hair and outsized egos roam, home to George W. Bush,



Photo 2: Street view of the Poe Street *T.N.B.* performance site. The final scene of the performance took place on the street.

Photo 3: Backyard view of the Poe Street *T.N.B.* performance site. Audiences entered through a break in the back fence and through the back door vicariously burglarizing the house.
Photos: Thomas Riccio

and dozens of wacky Republican billionaires, and the Dallas Cowboys cheerleaders. It is also a city suffering from historical amnesia, haunted by the JFK assassination, compulsively tearing down the past in favor of the new, slick, shiny, reflection of air-conditioned surfaces. Money is no object.

Butch McGregor, a genuinely big hearted good ole boy from rural East Texas and the Trinity Grove’s managing partner, has become a stalwart in-kind patron of the Dead White Zombies. Our productions have drawn numerous first time visitors and public attention to the once forbidding West Dallas. It is my hope we are not simply playing out the scenario of artists as cannon fodder real estate development. Since 2012 the Dead White Zombies have presented four of its six productions in West Dallas. Our West Dallas residency has been profoundly significant to our evolution. It is not often an experimental performance group is given the time, space, and support necessary to develop an aesthetic, methodology, and following. It is no understatement to say that McGregor’s

support was integral to the co-creation of the DWZ aesthetic and mission.

West Dallas provided a venue, a transfer point, enabling DWZ and me to experiment and evaluate what I had gained from nearly 25 years of work in the area of ritual and indigenous performance. What I had learned, working with the Inupiat and Yup'ik of Alaska, the Zulu, several groups in Zambia, Kenya, Tanzania, Ethiopia, the !Xuu Bushmen of the Kalahari, in Burkina Faso, and elsewhere in Africa, Korea, and the Sakha of central Siberia, is not mine to keep. Conducting research, workshops, creating performance, and writing academic articles, were prelude to a larger task: bringing the quickly vanishing, orally transmitted, place-based knowledge gathered at the margins of a globalization to my own culture. Such knowledge dies if not passed on. In a world facing unprecedented challenges, every bit of the earth's knowledge needs to be accessed as we emerge into globally indigenous culture of earthlings. West Dallas and DWZ is a laboratory

Indigenous cultures share variations and degrees of a very different world, one that is organized around an earth-centric community of place inhabited by humans, animals, elements, the climate, the spirits, and ancestors. In indigenous performance these elements are given form and expression. To the western eye they seem strange and exotic, when they are in fact functional, performed interactions with a dynamic, macrocosmic reality. Performance and ritual within the indigenous worldview is practical and functional, enacting real change, as it serves to celebrate, reiterate, and balance and maintain community. Humans, being the greatest benefactors and most enabled of the world's inhabitants, are responsible for the enactment of performance.

Dead White Zombies, was founded in 2011 by Lori McCarty, Brad Hennigan, and myself, as a Dallas-based post-disciplinary performance collective that creates immersive, site-specific works which include elements of theatre, dance, sound, visual, sculptural, and media art to create performance installations. What we offer is a modest exploration to introduce alternative dramaturgical models and assert performance as a practical and functional event that bespeaks a new and emerging indigenous worldview.

Inspired by an indigenous, hunter-gatherer way of being in the world, which understands performance as a functional way to manifest and interact with an animated world. Dead White Zombies view the world as a multi-vocal flux of complex, overlaying and interplaying voices and narratives. Some DWZ precepts:

The world, when allowed to speak and be heard shapes its own necessary form and expression.

The act of a performance is viewed as a semi-sacred event, a gathering place where the animated world—be they people, elements, objects, environment, spirits, and animals—convenes to express, examine, and reflect on the greater animate world.

Dead White Zombies does not shape its expressions to any one inheritance or dramaturgical conventions, but rather seeks to articulate what is offered by the given elements and personalities. Chance shapes the moment.

Performance installations are seen as a starting point in the re-introduction to an indigenous sense of place. It seeks to incorporate a broad range of element—materials, architectural settings, media, performed expressions, and the extensive use of everyday, found, and natural objects—in aestheticized contexts.

DWZ works to create performance installations as networks, often using overlapping, simultaneous, and sustained actions, and chance, to enable unforeseen interactions among a composite of elements.

DWZ seeks to create a constantly evolving performance organism, alive and authentic, wavering between the real and performed, folding viewers into an evolving and ever changing performance.

Although viewers/ participants within this context maintain a degree of self-identity and autonomy they are seen as co-creators immersed the in the same sensory narrative experience as are performers.

Dead White Zombies are a loose and flexible community of provocateurs. Essentially, like-minded theatre, performance,

Photo 4: *Flesh World*, Cameron (Justin Locklear) is seduced and tortured by the recently deceased K-Low (Stephanie Cleghorn). Performed in a former tool cage. Photo: Dean Terry





Photo 5: *Flesh World*, Jimmy Mac (Ben Miro) and K-Low (Stephanie Cleghorn) in the scene where she must relinquish her life defenses. Photo: Thomas Riccio

sound, video, visual artists, and misfits—those disenchanted with the increasing corporatization of American culture and its performing arts institutions. We are an avant-garde new age folk group that creates on a project-to-project basis. We are serious, irreverent, and anarchic; I am the group's Poo Pah Doo, a title deliberately chosen to prevent my being taken too seriously. We carve out a moment in time and space, a temporary autonomous zone, creating performance and then disappearing until the next project. We gather when we need to create performance in a manner offered by a moment full of chance. For many indigenous cultures, chance is how the spirits speak. We accept rather than expect, listening and responding, shaping our expression and content to the need of a project and letting it take us when and where it will. We don't require a theatre, which are implicitly laden with conventions of expectations, behavior, response, performance, dramaturgy, design, and bureaucracy which nefariously censors and shapes creativity. Our mission statement:

We see ourselves as ironic and fun loving agent-provocateurs in an age of intellectual and cultural leveling, conformity,

franchise, and mass marketing. We are Dead because we are White, pale reflections of what was once. We are Zombies because we are still walking around seeking life. We simply do what we want, when and where we want because we don't know what else to do. (www.deadwhitezombies.com)

Flesh World, presented in the spring of 2012, was part one of a trilogy. Inspired and dramaturgically modeled after a Tujia funeral ritual from southern China. The



Photo 6: *Flesh World*, Cameron (Justin Locklear), consults K-Low (Stephanie Cleghorn), giving her words from "on high" from what she believed in life was to lead her through death. Photo: Dean Terry

performance dealt with a woman's acceptance of death. *Flesh World* was presented in nine scenes or lessons, with the audiences journeying with the action through a cavernous metal building in West Dallas, through the stages of reconciliation and acceptance of death.

Flesh World keeps it real, real meta. The obscure story drops viewers into a disorienting world and demands they work to uncover their own conclusions and to form interpretations based on few narrative clues. I've yet to figure out portions—the delineations between the spiritual realm and the protagonist's own psyche—and the fact that it's still on my mind speaks to the impression it imparts. (Hamilton, *Dallas Observer* 11 June 2012) [Photos 4-6]

Part two of the trilogy was *(w)hole*, presented in the fall of 2012 and like *Flesh World* presented in a 36,000 square foot former welding and metal shop. The building's history and former use inspired and shaped the narratives of both works. The building's size height and volume, acoustics, found objects, and its patina and atmosphere of post-industrial fatigue, informed the work.

(w)hole followed the soul lives of two lovers, separated at the fall of Troy and searching for each other through time and the many incarnations, transformations, and lessons of a soul. Each of their lives served to teach another lesson, deepening their understanding of spiritual love. Eighteen trained actors, children, and non-actors inhabited the space. Upon entering the building, audiences (which were limited to 50) were sequestered in a decrepit former office and waiting area. The performance began when audiences were led to a cramped office and stood waiting for a seated Jennifer Culver—a first time actor and talented

psychic, soul and card reader—to open her eyes. She set the frame for the performance, which would be equal parts ritual, meditation, and experiential journey. Each audience member was given a stone, a talisman, representing their soul, and instructed, "You will know what to do with it." During the performance she would inhabit the central area of the space, sitting at a large, candle-lit oak table, giving readings that many remarked were astonishingly accurate. Her lines initiating the performance,

It gladdens me when I see so many of you together. Each one of you brings with them their own individual hue, which contributes to the light within this place. We are aware that your lifestyles are different, that matters not. It matters that you came here together. That is what is important now. Let me say to you, a few words about tonight. I know that much of what is inside will sometime confuse your minds. Sometimes you will think you are stumbling about, without understanding. Understand in a different way, beyond the rational, time, material, and technologically conditioned mind. Accept chance, for it is how the spirits speak. You being here now, us meeting, why are you here? What and how you are about to see and feel is as it should be. (Riccio, *(w)hole*) [Photo 7].

(w)hole, like *Flesh World*, was an immersion, as dependent on performed action and language as it was on the audience's journey through several sensorial and emotively evocative environments. Sound and video were also deployed as strategic elements, revealing lives lived and

emotional states. Working with noted French sound designer Frank DuFour and acclaimed Oakland-based composer Scot Gresham-Lancaster, the capacious building underwent "Sonification." In both performances each area had its own sound, which constellated with each narrative moment/emotion of the performances. In addition to traditional speakers, used for localized areas, the designers worked to activate the entire building as a sonic resonator. Hyper-directional speakers, which use an advanced technology enabling a focused and intense narrow

Photo 7: *(w)hole*, Jennifer Culver does a reading of an audience member's future. Kathryn Culver, her daughter and fellow cast member, looks on. Photo: Katie Nowacki





Photo 8: *(w)hole*, Cassandra (Stephanie Cleghorn), tied in bungee cords of memory, observed by her unrequited love (Ben Miro), in the opening scene.
Photo: Alisa Levy



Photo 9: *(w)hole*, Justin Locklear in an incarnation as Catherine the Great.
Photo: Dean Terry

beam refracted off of the building's metal walls and girders. Combined with these speakers were "Disrupters" which were applied to metal down spouts, walls, mesh and glass, effectively playing the building enabling audiences to pass through emotion and narrative sound spaces. Sounds were looped and could be heard with varying intensities in the distance, lingering, reminding, and conveying a sense of a lived and layered life, and an alive, enveloping, ethereal world.

The installations, the objects, settings, and their design, were evolved during the development process. In all DWZ productions we begin with a general idea and progressively evolve details, elements, textures, colors, sounds, lighting, and spacial relationships in dialogue with performance process. There are no "tech" rehearsals and no stage manager; performers operate lighting, scenic, or sound "cues" which are integrated into the performance. Anyone participating in the process is free to comment and make suggestions on any aspect of the performance. Visitors to rehearsals are welcome. The process, which continues through public performance, is open, communal, reflexive, intuitive, and endless, inspired by the relaxed atmosphere that have been witnessed in numerous indigenous settings around the world. At times it is difficult to define who is a performer. I do not direct in a classic theatrical sense, yet everything that needs to be gets done.

Participants are encouraged to bring their own understanding to the work, contributing to the process. In a similar way, the environment itself might offer up an object. When working *Flesh World* we discovered a large folded

pile of material. When we opened it a 125' x 50' sign was revealed. It had originally been hung as an advertisement on the side of a downtown building. We created flats with it which resulted in a translucent quality when lit from behind.

The low-tech sensibility and the very limited use of theatrical lighting make DWZ flexible and ecologically friendly which is consistent with our aesthetic. I am the primary designer and builder assisted by a production manager, Michael Cleveland, and theatrical designer, Dale Seeds. Like a sculptor, the act of physically interacting with materials and the environment deepens my understanding of the work. The rough authenticity is a statement in itself. Images from the performance are described in the *Dallas Observer*.

Scenes spark around us like a long tail of igniting firecrackers. Another room is illuminated. Next, a vignette. Soon all are available for exploration. The twisting paths feel like the unfathomable tunneling of memory storage, but the lives we're moving through are not our own. Even the sound, while anchored scene-by-scene, bleeds gently into the next. We're fumbling into another's databank, threading together the experiences as we travel.

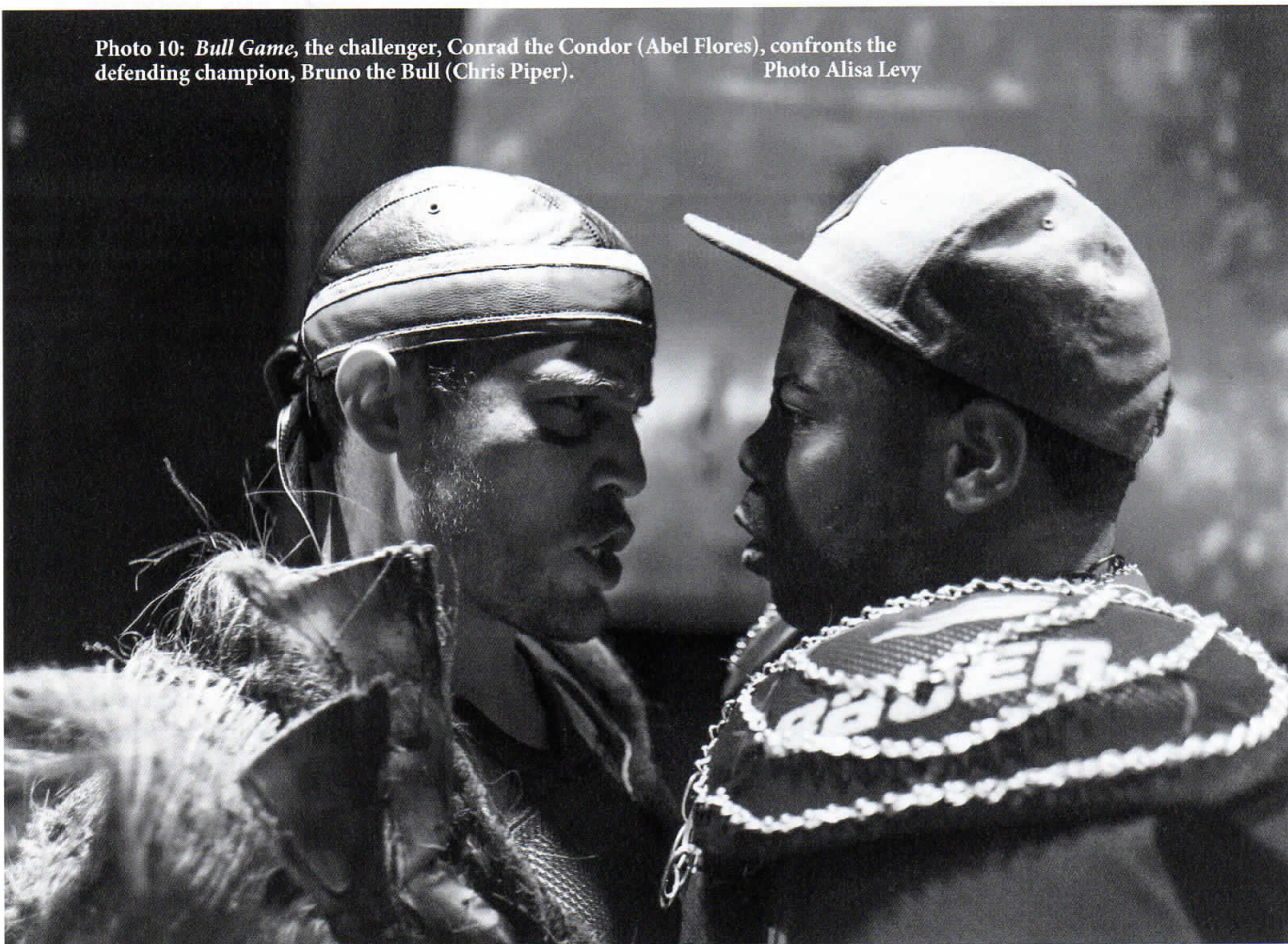
In the back of the house, a 14-year-old boy plays Journey romanthems on a keyboard, wrapped in a glowing blue light. In the center, Riccio's own

childhood film reel whirls, showing unifying events like birthday parties and holidays. All the while the central characters shift roles, times, genders, ages and locations in search of a new ending. In search of completeness. (Laughlin, *Dallas Observer*, 7 Dec. 2012).

As in all DWZ performances, nothing is expected or required of its audiences, they are free to move where and how they will and to actively shape their own experience and narrative. They enter and exit the playing space to obtain beverages or have a smoke outside where a fire pit is burning. There are no restrictions on taking photos or video during any of our performances. This informal and familial atmosphere was inspired by numerous ritual and festival experiences in Africa and Alaska. In particular a festival outside of Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, burns in my memory. When in an open field performers emerged in full body raffia and mask, from a variety of directions. The viewer had the option to get closer, participate, stand and watch the totality, or chat with a companion. Moments later the performance topography would shift again and then again. My companion that night told me, "You do what you need to do. They are spirits, we are spirits, go to them if you need. Otherwise, stay."

Excepting the introductory scenes, actions were presented as a cascade, often simultaneous and sometimes

Photo 10: *Bull Game*, the challenger, Conrad the Condor (Abel Flores), confronts the defending champion, Bruno the Bull (Chris Piper). Photo Alisa Levy

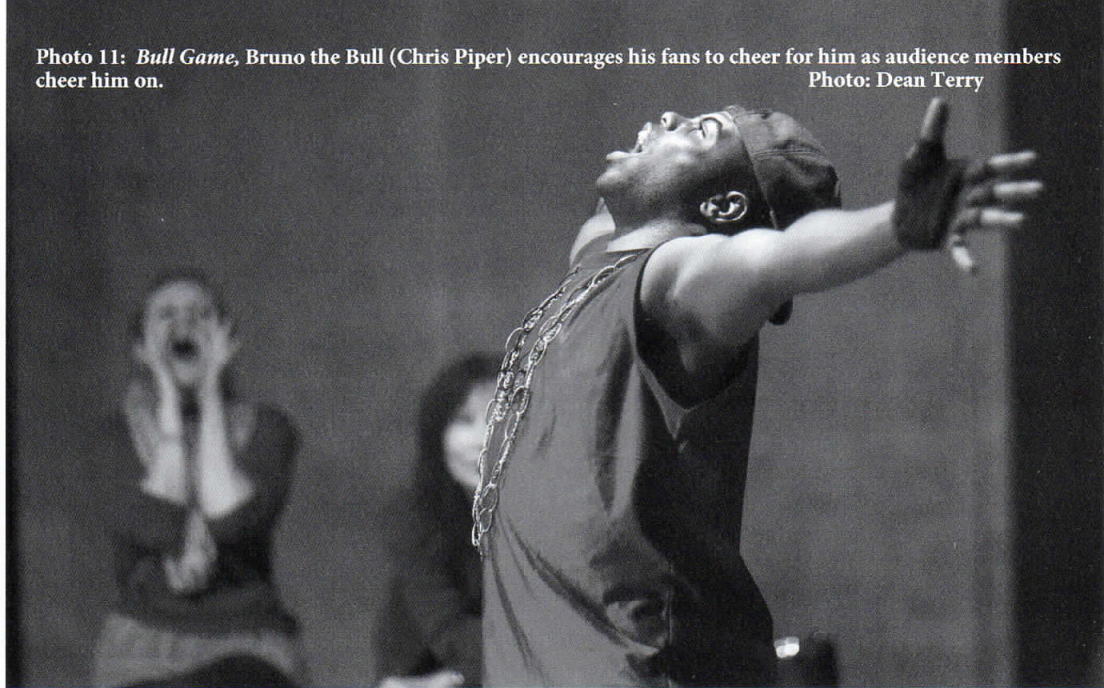


looped, repeated with variations. In one given moment a twelve-year-old girl would be quietly reading love letters at an isolated desk while in distant areas an old woman dies on a gurney comforted by her son, two young lovers meet awkwardly for the first time, a teenage boy plays love songs from the 1980s on his electric piano, a woman wanders grieving for her lost sight, and a lover looks for his wife in war-ravaged medieval Europe. It was impossible

to take in the entire performance in one visit. Some scenes, depending on audience interactions, could extend the performance from 90 minutes to nearly three hours. (*w*) *hole* was meditative piece inspired by Hindu mythology and ritual shaped by its inspiration, environment, elements, and context to create a unity of form and function and expression. [Photos 8-9]

Bull Game, presented in November of 2013, created a sports arena in a 20,000 square foot former mechanics shop (used to create high performance vehicles). The performance was inspired by Zulu, Mayan, and Ngoni fertility and combat rituals. Audiences were assigned to either the blue or red team by the luck of a draw and they were required to walk through a vast empty darkness to an isolated island of light where cheerleaders assigned bench seating and trained cheers and chants. The mythological performance followed the fate of the reigning champion who must die in order to allow continuation. The competitive nature of humanity, its tired, spent, and corrupted pattern, and its destructive implications for the species and planet were central. As the performance progressed the audience/spectators became actively competitive, demonstrating how much competition is a part of human nature. Like all DWZ performances, a concrete and visceral individual story is set in relief on a large, mythic canvas, a place where the boundaries between mythic and personal, reality and artifice are permeable, where time is transcended, and the distinction between spectator and performer blurred. Cerroni, writing in *Theatre Jones*, says,

In the *Bull Game*, one gains nobility only through violence. In myth, heroes are forced to violence because of their nobility. This is a world where mythology has gone wrong and turned into nightmare disconnected from the collective moral consciousness that imbued bloodshed with virtue. This delicate connection to nature is pitted against



the hideous strength of the *Bull Game*. (Cerroni, *Theatre Jones*, 14 Dec. 2013) [Photos 10-12]

T.N.B. (typical nigga behavior), the performance, which began this article, was the most controversial and political of DWZ's offerings to date. The work developed from a long-simmering idea shaped by years of working with the inner-city African American community in my hometown of Cleveland. Later, when teaching high school in crack- and gang-infested Bedford-Stuyvesant in the early 1980s, I became captivated by the brutal and evocative poetry of African American street language. The spark for the performance was a recent spate of brutal Dallas Police interactions with African American youth, and most significantly, my friendship with David Jeremiah, who played the lead in *T.N.B.* David, a man in his late twenties, had developed into a talented and well-regarded actor over the last several years, working consistently with several regional theatres in the Dallas-Fort Worth area. He is also a former member of the Oak Cliff Gang and a convicted felon. He had since turned his life around but because of a probation violation he is now serving a two-year sentence in a state correctional facility stemming from weapons, assault, and breaking and entering charges dating from 2003. Through conversations with him I wrote the script, dramaturgically shaping it to a shamanic healing ritual of the Sakha people of central Siberia.

Although David left the gang life it was still very much a part of his identity and worldview. The process of developing the script organically shaped around the autobiography of David's life as a gang-banger and in rehearsal drew on aspects of drama therapy that I applied while working with indigenous groups traumatized by war, colonization, social disruption or cultural loss. His violent past was contradictory, something he regretted and cherished. It set him apart, giving him an aura of danger and raw masculinity that attracted people to him, setting him apart as he made his way in the more refined art and theatre

Photo 12: *Bull Game*, a view from the Bull Game goal, a tire. Photo: Dean Terry



scene of Dallas. But, as the process revealed, he was haunted by it.

Spooky was the name of the character David played, a person living like a ghost. We were friends before going into rehearsal, and had established a trust, talking extensively, and understanding that this performance was going to push him personally. "Do it man, need to release the demons living in me" he told me. Having access to his police records and long rap sheet, I had inserted a variety of personal references into the text. By playing a character he gained access to a long hidden self.

During the rehearsal process David and the cast were free to suggest word and line adjustments, which drew on David's gang experiences. His often raw and brutal contributions were offset by the fluid and fertile imagination of Justin Locklear, who played Roosevelt Jones, his white twin brother. In keeping the shamanic dramaturgy, white is of the spirit world, the opposite, the twin the double, the revealer, and in *T.N.B.* the character of Roosevelt Jones (taken from a name created by a white musician in the 1950s who wrote and recorded black or "race" music) was a spirit helper to guide Spooky through his journey. Early in the ritual of his healing, Roosevelt provokes Spooky to confront the demon he is hiding. The result is the letting out a venomous spew,

SPOOKY: Hell, naw, nigga. Pussy, pussy, pussy. Money, money, money. Murder, Murder, Murder, nigga. Fuck that good boy shit. Leave dat shit to Carlton, nigga, I just wanna fuck white hoes, drive da Benzos 'n kill these hatin' ass niggas. Matter of fact I wanna fuck a white hoe in my Benzo while shootin' a hate ass nigga. Nigga, fuck these hos. I'll save the world before I save a bitch. Let her break my dick before I let her break my wallet. MOB, nigga. And for all you broke ass niggas, get money nigga. Money make a short niggas tall, n' the man on the moon fall. Money turn day into night and a lose pussy tight. Nigga, don't have any money go buy you some. And for any of you lame niggas who think your stomach growl louder than mine, bang bang nigga. I'll lay in the bushes for a week til you come home then run up on your 'n kill you, nigga. I'll go to your grave to kill you again. Kill. Bow down on get laid down. OCC for life, nigga and fuck these laws. They come to get use we gonna shoot it out. Maurice Clemens is my hero, nigga, yeah, fuck nigga, fuck with me...

ROOSEVELT JONES: Y'all caught a ghetto flow....

SPOOKY: What this all about?

ROOSEVELT JONES: I need your contribution for the makin' of the new world order.

SPOOKY: You can't hustle a hustler.

ROOSEVELT JONES: Blood for the gods, nigga. Axing for few fuckin bucks, man! Dis all for you nigga.

SPOOKY: Dime all I have. Wanksta...

SPOOKY gives him \$10. Something happens in the room.

ROOSEVELT JONES: I wanna axe you a question.

SPOOKY: What the fuk happenin'

With the exchange of money Spooky initiates the process of his healing, which leads to the revelation at the end of the performance that he is dead (or that his gangster self is), shot by a liquor storeowner.

Jonathan GNO White, a well-known spoken word artist had grown up in one of the worst gang areas of South Dallas and was familiar with gang culture, context, and vernacular. GNO played Storm Crow, who at first is only a voiced presence haunting the house. When he finally appears it is as the spirit manifestation of 500 years of African American maleness. It will be his job to take Spooky, to cleanse Spooky. An excerpt from their initial encounter:

SPOOKY: Who are you?

STORM CROW: I'm the real nigga that looms over everything. Who are you?

SPOOKY: What I say is who I am.

STORM CROW: You a silly motherfucker.

SPOOKY: Oh, you see everything?

STORM CROW: Everything all the time. (Stands suddenly. Looks keenly at SPOOKY) World imprinted on your soul.

SPOOKY: You looking at my soul now?

STORM CROW: All sorts of shit goin' on. History swirlin' all round.

SPOOKY: Tell me old skool...

STORM CROW: Dirty and hard...Heavy, tired, still pumpin' strong...

SPOOKY: What else?

STORM CROW: How'd that soul get to be so messed up?

SPOOKY: Let me ask you.

STORM CROW: What?

SPOOKY: What more important, soul or skin?

STORM CROW: What?

SPOOKY: One attached to the other?

STORM CROW: Skin melts like time.

SPOOKY: So, I just holdin' this soul for the time being?

STORM CROW: You really are Spooky.

SPOOKY: Ghost walking through it...

STORM CROW: Shadows all round.

Rhianna Mack brought her own growing-up-in-hood immediacy to the role, bringing an understanding of character that could only be gained by bearing the burden of being a beautiful woman raised in the macho world of urban black America. She was a prism of the many women of Spooky's life, moving from prostitute, to girlfriend to academic to fourteen-year-old girl. The awakened spirits that haunted.

The simulated rape scene of the fourteen year old, which

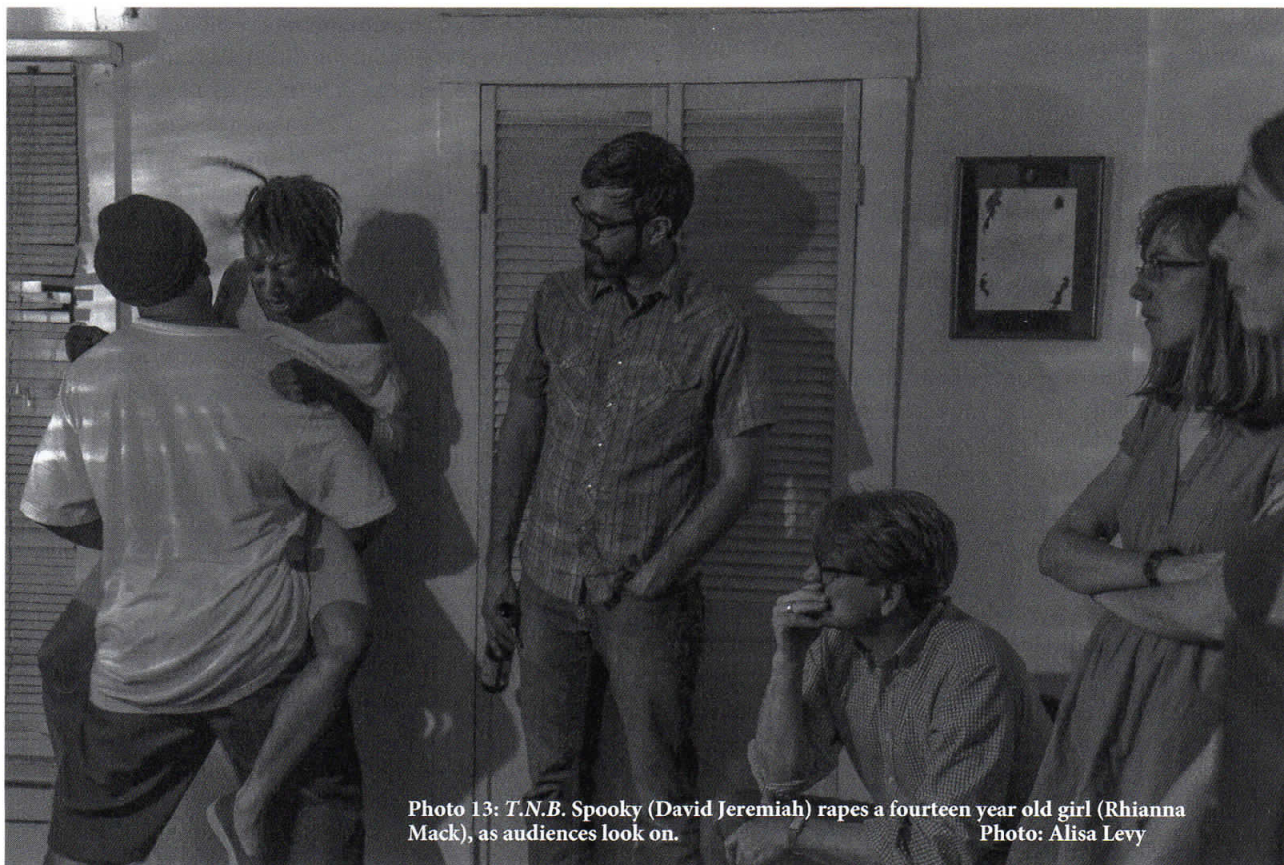


Photo 13: *T.N.B.* Spooky (David Jeremiah) rapes a fourteen year old girl (Rhianna Mack), as audiences look on. Photo: Alisa Levy

was brutal and graphic, leaving the girl devastated and Spooky unrepentant and boastful, was the performance's most controversial scene. [Photo 13] The spiritual darkness of the scene was followed by a scene with Spooky's deceased Mama, who up to that point had been a constant presence in the house, washing dishes, folding clothes, cleaning, serving collard greens to audience members, sitting in the kitchen cutting coupons or in the parlor reading her bible. Performed by Becki McDonald, a woman raised in a church family and in possession of a wonderful singing voice that counterpointed the rape scene and other moments of Spooky's need with gospel song reassurances.

I do not direct performers in the traditional sense of theatre, but rather watch and listen, coaxing the performer through their individuality to find a universal. When working with the !Xuu Bushman of the Kalahari I was struck by how they had no sense or need for metaphor. For them everything exists simultaneously as a particular in the present and eternally; itself and its deeper self at once. For the Bushmen we are all part of a greater totality living within us all. To perform the wind is to become the wind, becoming possessed by another part of the world/self. The notion of acting perplexed them and they likened it to what an evil and disingenuous witch doctor would do. To pretend is to lie. They were equally perplexed by the need for rehearsal. Although they have an ancient and complex ritual and song tradition, no one ever trained or rehearsed. "Everything is here, you give what you know", Machai, a healer told me touching his heart. As a director I don't block, interpret or psychologize, and as I get older I do less and less. I listen to what is present. It is similar to the Zen concept of wabi sabi, or the Taoist way as told to me in an interview with She Jin He, a Miao shaman in southern China, "The world is loud close your ears." My job is that of facilitating the coming into being of an organic, living entity, a performance. The process is a mysterious amalgam of performers, circumstances, ideas, objects, feelings, and chance. Its art is allowing elements to reveal themselves. Performances are the access point to a greater reality, making visible

that which surrounds us. Brentney Hamilton in *Pegasus News* wrote:

Shoring up the superb writing, each actor's performance is, across the board, phenomenal. You will care about these characters. And, sometimes that empathy will rock your moral core.

[. . .] Each actor fully commits, even with the added obstacle of staying in character while occasionally zigzagging around extremely nervous viewers [...] No other company is experimenting with the kind of intellectually stirring and socially urgent content matter that *Dead White Zombies* so brazenly tackles. It is, arguably, the most significant artistic contribution to the Dallas community because of its experimentation, radicalism, and fearlessness. (Hamilton, *Pegasus News*)

For David and those experiencing the performance who had lived the "G" or gangster life, *T.N.B.* served as drama therapy, enabling a playing out as to better identify, comprehend, objectify and expel that which had infected their lives. When former and current gangs members, Latino and African American, attended the performance, their reactions went beyond the blend of visceral shock, fear, and fascination characteristic of other audiences. Instead responses veered sharply from intense, drilling focus to boisterous revelry. They were comfortable, at home, at times completing lines, seamlessly becoming adjunct characters in a familiar drama. [Photo 14-15] *T.N.B.*, like a ritual, blurred artifice and reality by accessing a mythos. The African American gang member was a

Photo 14: *T.N.B.* Spooky (David Jeremiah) is seated in an electric chair, being questioned by Detective Carter the backyard as audiences look on and record the scene. Photo: Alisa Levy



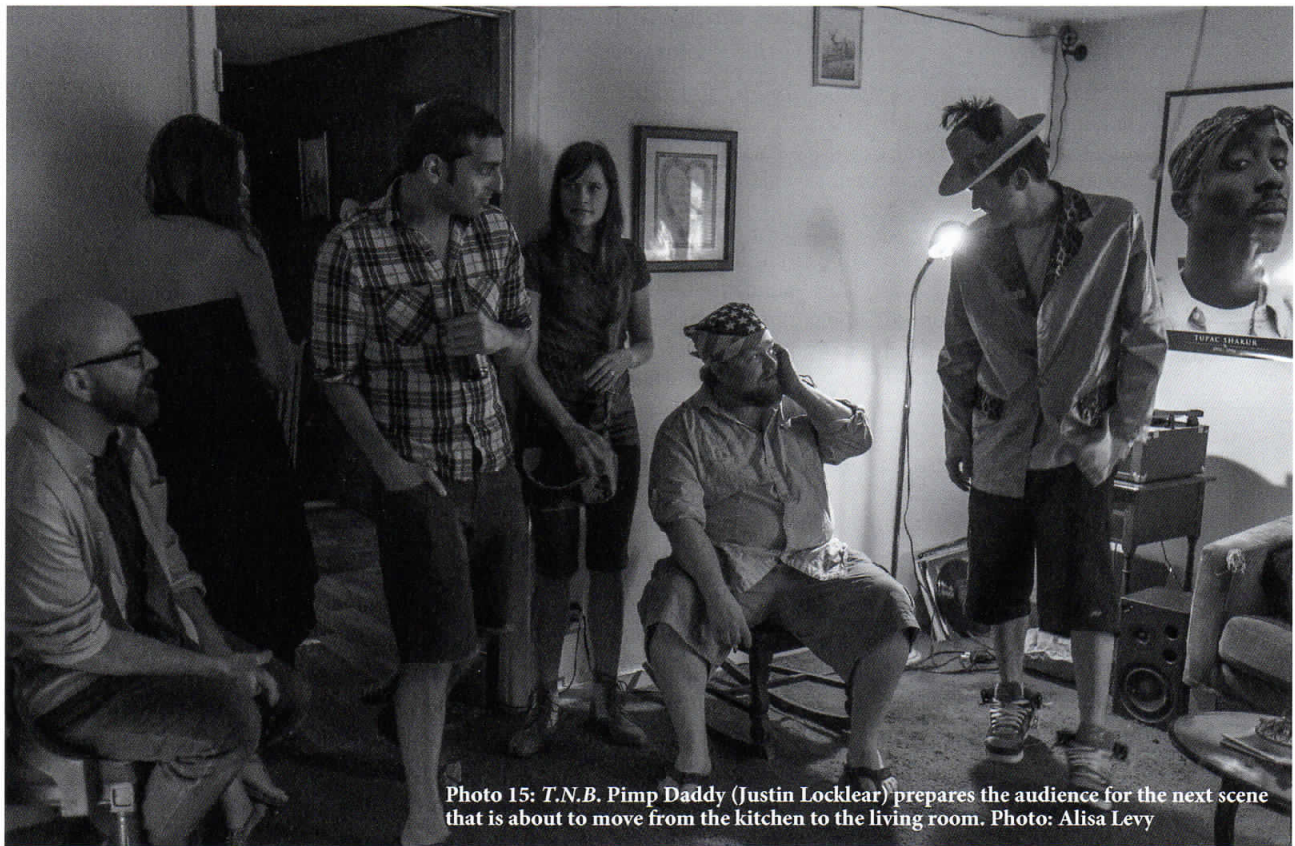


Photo 15: *T.N.B.* Pimp Daddy (Justin Locklear) prepares the audience for the next scene that is about to move from the kitchen to the living room. Photo: Alisa Levy

role, which gave them identity and a place in the world, as it confined, marginalized, and abetted a violent self-destruction.

Rihanna Mack, having gone from prostitute, to girlfriend, to fourteen-year-old girl, transforms near the end into Helen, an academic who critiques Spooky's behavior, and then back to Charleene, a confident and forthright prostitute inspired by Blaxploitation movies from the 1970s. [Photo 16]

HELEN: Spooky identifies with the African-American struggle. It grounds him. Its visceral, implies a cultural identity and sense of community that he otherwise lacks in this numbing, homogenizing world we live in.

SPOOKY: Baby girl?

HELEN: Rebellion, it is one of the few freedoms and identities you have left.

SPOOKY: You been flaking on me, don't know who you are anymore.

CHARLEENE: Not gonna treat me like this! Playing out some macho gangster scene you saw on teevee is what you're doing!

ROOSEVLET JONES: Playing out some racial-gender stereotypes, perpetuating and holding back progress all at the same time!

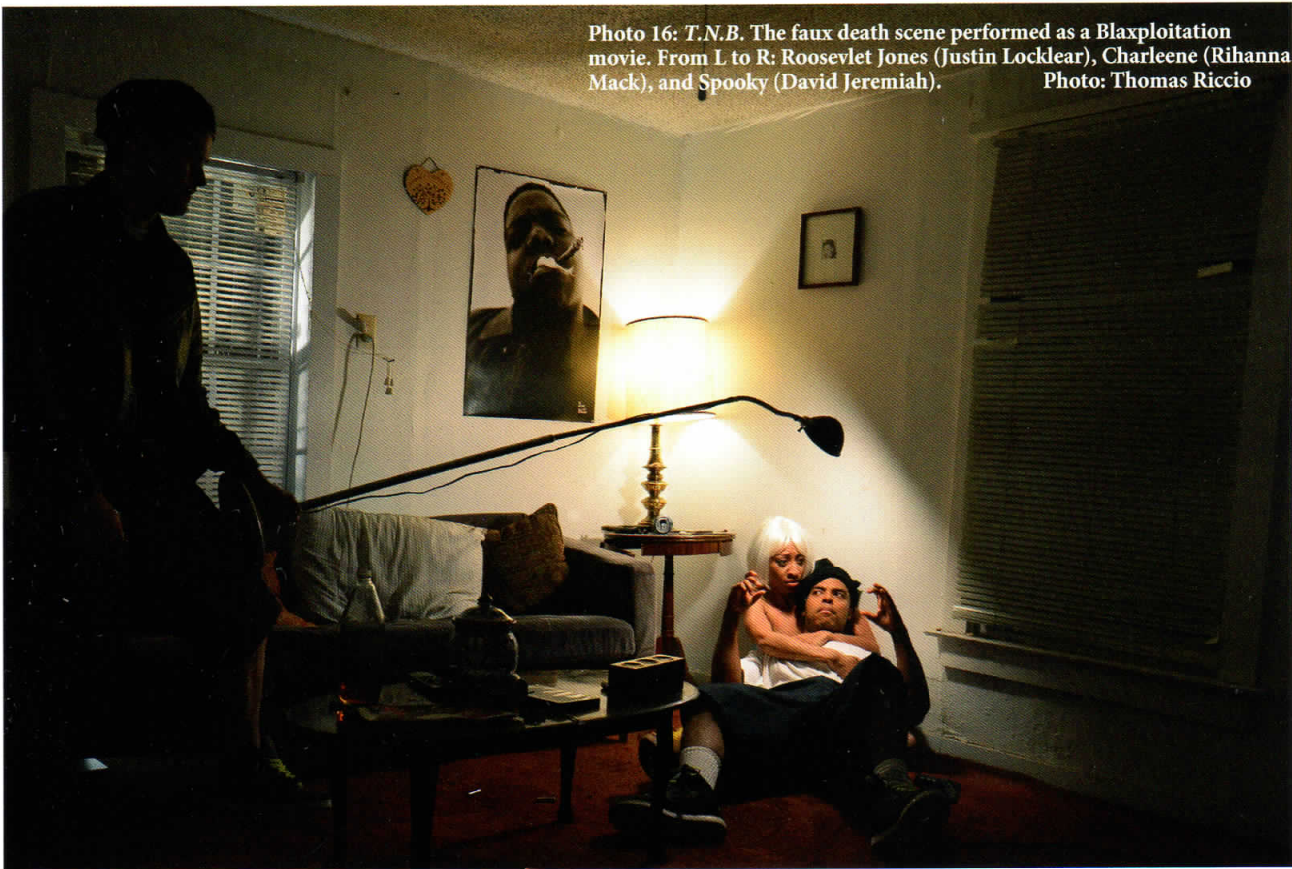
The house on Poe Street in West Dallas evolved into an ideal setting for *T.N.B.* The walls, furniture, and carpet

were well worn and the faint smell of cat urine mingled with the homey smell of collard greens cooking on the kitchen stove. The greens were served up by Mama (Becki McDonald) to anyone who wanted them. With closed circuit television (CCTV) cameras and monitors in each of the four main first floor rooms—dining, living, parlor and kitchen—audiences could choose to sit and observe or follow the action. In many ways it was like being at home. Though you might be seated in the living room you could overhear, as if a member of the family, the doings from another part of the house. When watching the action on a monitor you also watched other audience members watching the action as they were watching you. The homey atmosphere offset the discomfort of physical proximity and often-assaultive actions, making the audience more comfortable in its discomfort as it humanized Spooky for whom we became intimate. [Photo 17]

The use of cameras, video, and monitors in DWZ performances has grown into a central theme/motif, as indeed it has become for our culture. I developed the script to a multi-perspective understanding of character and storytelling alternating between psychological realism, social and political contextualization, and historical commentary lifting the narrative beyond the particular.

Cell phone, photography, and video by the audience during the performance was unrestricted and some audience members posted videos during the performance.

Photo 16: T.N.B. The faux death scene performed as a Blaxploitation movie. From L to R: Roosevelt Jones (Justin Locklear), Charleene (Rihanna Mack), and Spooky (David Jeremiah). Photo: Thomas Riccio



This community-based networking was a natural outgrowth of our community-sharing ethos and an advertising boon. At first it seemed like it was about ghetto porn, with white and African American audiences being titillated by the dangerous and exotic, up close yet safe.

Beside the rape scene, the use of the word “nigga” and “ho” and “bitch” and a fusillade of expletives throughout the performance sparked much public discussion. Some white audiences and critics were aghast and offended and not sure how to respond. An excerpt from one of the final scenes of the performance that interrogates the use of gang vernacular:

STORM CROW: You’s doing hard time because you can’t give it up.

ROOSEVELT JONES: Hard time junkie.

STORM CROW: Dat slave nigga victim shit in your blood.

SPOOKY :Ah man, I was just chillaxing, hangin’ wid my ho.

SPOOKY goes into the bathroom with CHARLEENE banging on the bathroom door. Meanwhile, MAMA begins to serve dinner and fills plates with bullets.

CHARLEENE: Dat ho shit is dying.

SPOOKY: Den get me another ho.

ROOSEVELT JONES: You killed yer ho, dis her dismissed her...

SPOOKY: I didn’t kill no ho.

STORM CROW: You’s to stupid ta know!

CHARLEENE: I ain’t a ho!

SPOOKY: Shut up bitch!

CHARLEENE: I ain’t gonna shut up no more.

STORM CROW: Cos you hatin’ yerself SO much you gotta have everything round you dead.

CHARLEENE: Why you beat on me?

SPOOKY: Doin’ what’s got ta be done.

CHARLEENE: Beat the shit is normal shit?

STORM CROW: You one confused motherfucker.

ROOSEVELT JONES: In one confused situation here.

SPOOKY: Oh and you ain’t confused, wigger?

STORM CROW: I lived da “struggle” and I am a brother, the father of it!

SPOOKY: That so, nigga?

STORM CROW :Wad dis nigga shit, nigga dat, nigga nigga. You thinkin’ it givin’ u da power over da slave shit dat haunts yer head? Nigga, da nigga shit just makin’ another kinda nigga out of you nigga. You like that slave nigga shit so much yous a niggas nigga now.

CHARLEENE: Niggas nigga.

MAMA: What happen to my baby’s dreams?

STORM CROW: This ain’t goin’ away no matter how much dope you do, revenge you seek. [Photo 18]

The online theatre and entertainment website, *Theatre Jones*, did a double review, one by its white editor/

publisher, Mark Lowry, the other by an African American reviewer, Lindsay Jenkins. Here are excerpts from the Jenkins review:

Without a doubt, this production lives up to the hype—artistically, theatrically and intellectually. It takes a minute to digest how a play written by a White guy can speak so truthfully to a certain facet of the Black experience. The dialogue is organic, the storyline gritty and real. It's not every Black man's experience by any stretch of the imagination, but for this character in this play, it's believable—and a wonder to watch.

Make no mistake, it gets really uncomfortable at times. The rooms are cramped and offer little mobility for the audience to move around. It helps the audience understand physically what the main character, Spooky (played by David Jeremiah), experiences mentally.

Is that really necessary?

The N-word is a virus that affects everyone in this play—even the white character, Roosevelt (Justin Locklear), who

is Spooky's "twin" brother.

It's everywhere and rolls easily off the tongues of the actors.

Why? Because the truth is that it rolls easily off the tongues of people all across America and beyond.

I know some White people don't understand it, and that's fine; it's not meant for you. It's a language that

speaks to a specific class and, yes, race of people.

The omission of this word would have taken away from the reality of this piece.

Archetype or stereotype? What's the difference?

Spooky is a scary character. He's a loose cannon. He's confused and lost, yet he's so familiar. Yes, familiar. I have known, in my short lifetime, a handful of people just like Spooky—same background, same hang-ups. It ain't pretty, but

it's real. Spooky is the sum of all of his parts. He's carrying around with him more than a century's worth of baggage, which is explored in the play. As one of Spooky's demons, Storm Crow, played by spoken word artist Jonathan "Gno" White says: Spooky is a "relic of an unforgiving and unresolved past."

For some it will be like porn, a chance to watch something dirty and forbidden. For others it will be a glimpse into the mind of one isolated character. And still others will see the universal truths that lie in this *T.N.B.* (Jenkins, *Theatre Jones*, 18 June 2013)

Central to the role of Roosevelt Jones is the trickster, a playful spirit transforming and tweaking the normative. DWZ positions itself similarly. The function of the trickster in society and culture is to accept and live comfortably, to revel in and reveal contradictions. Inhabiting in-between spaces is both vulnerable and optimal, offering little protection yet the ability to see widely and react quickly. It is a space of maneuverability, mutability and infinite



Photo 17: *T.N.B.* Closed Circuit Television Monitor depicting the four room performance area, clockwise; living room, kitchen, dining room, and parlor. Photo: Alisa Levy

possibility. DWZ have no permanent space, production style, or season, and are flagrantly unpredictable and irresponsible and yet have gained, in a short time, a loyal and vibrant following. We serve hungry audiences who are generally young in mind, body, or spirit, and in the main comprised of traditionally non-theatre audiences. In the main our audiences are visual artists, students, and others who have basically given up on theatre. Traditional theatre audiences are a small minority and either invigorated or confused and offended or puzzled by our lack of adherence



Photo 18: *T.N.B.* Spooky (David Jeremiah) fighting off imaginary foes in the final scene of *T.N.B.*
Photo: Alisa Levy

to convention.

Why the trickster? DWZ feels the deadening creep of the evolving role of performance and its artists into service workers, serving to reaffirm the economic, political, and social elite and is offering a response. In traditional societies the trickster is necessary to upset norms and convention, moving a culture forward. Creator and destroyer, leader and fool, real and imaginary, hero and mischief-maker, wise and reckless, predictably unpredictable, inspiration and reprehensible, saying one thing and meaning another. Yes, I may be tricking you now. We live in the time of the trickster, when permanence is provisional, the givens of the past called into question, and the ability to quickly read, adapt, and navigate our complex, multi-level reality key to survival. All hard and fast perceptions, values, loyalties, and ways of being in the world have been called into question, and probably for good reason. Most of it is suspect, used, abused, and commoditized to serve a system that is no longer working. A systemic re-evaluation is taking place around us, one that challenges the environmental, political, racial, cultural, social, and economic status quo. A systemic re-evaluation of performance, a revolution really, is also

necessary. Tricky times demand a trickster response.

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