

# Mischke's Doll

{ Watch this video! }

## White Lines

### Playwright Djola Branner blows the roof off dramatic conventions with *The House that Crack Built*

**Max Sparber**

published: October 18, 2000

"I really like this costume," actor Gavin Lawrence declares during a rehearsal of Djola Branner's *The House that Crack Built*, three days before the play is to open on October 13. Lawrence wears a natty, metallic-gray

two-piece suit with an equally shiny tie. The outfit gives the performer a slick and somewhat cruel look--moneyed, corporate, self-involved--that has become the hallmark of the disconnected black urban professional in contemporary African-American theater. The suit fits well, in the way that

*InStyle* fashion editor Hal Rubenstein defined a good fit in the book *Paisley Goes With Nothing*: You can dance in it. For Lawrence's character, this sort of fit is important, as we shall see in a moment, and he briefly discusses with costume designer Julie Frabotta Louris how a silver tie clip will complement his ensemble. Lawrence likes the way the tie clip looks, but at some point in the play he needs to sneak it into a pocket, because otherwise it restrains his movement. "I have to do this," he tells her, demonstrating a twisting motion he makes with his arms in the air, causing his tie to gambol upward like a

banner in a gusty wind--a maneuver that is quite impossible with a tie clip.

This is one of many such spastic movements Lawrence will make in the show, which requires him to dance in his suit in an extraordinary routine choreographed by the playwright himself. Lawrence plays a character referred to in the script as simply the "Doctor," and his role is that of a smug lecturer whose attempt to produce an insipid educational program about crack addiction unravels around him. The Doctor has hired a small group of musicians and performers to flesh out his lecture, all of whom have their own experiences of addiction, and they immediately rebel against his clinical evaluation of the unruly world of cocaine dealers and users.

Branner, a 43-year-old writer and performer, sits in at the rehearsal, and during the play's many dance sequences steps in to demonstrate the timing of a step when an actor falters. Branner and Lawrence run through an elongated routine, and Branner's long frame rises and falls as he thrusts his hands into the air and then doubles over. The movement seems rich in possible meanings, calling to mind a man in chains, or a man being whipped. Lawrence replicates the movement, but with less polish; his dancing seems genuinely pained. As it turns out, such fumbling motion is perfectly appropriate to the production.

The play is deliberately ragged. A character referred to only as "the Poet" receives calls on his cell

**Craig Lassig**

[Drug czar Djola Branner \(seated\) with his crack troops on the Pillsbury House stage](#)

Drug czar Djola Branner (seated) with his crack troops on the Pillsbury House stage

phone throughout the performance, and huddles behind curtains and against the walls where he chatters noisily. Characters refuse to perform the actions assigned to them, and we are not certain whether these refusals are scripted or spontaneous until the Doctor bribes them to continue. The other performers talk out of turn, mocking the Doctor as he attempts to speak: An extended monologue about the structure of the cocaine trade, consisting of phrases such as *This foundation, composed of thousands and thousand of bricks bound by this sweet, sticky substance--this mortar, if you will...* dissolves into silence as a musician plays the bass riff to the Commodores' "Brick House" in the background, inspiring a drag queen to sing along.

The Drag Queen, in particular, will continue to pester the Doctor throughout the show, acting as both the sensible moral center to the production and a den mother to the cast of the play-within-a-play when the production breaks down entirely and switches spontaneously into a 12-Step meeting. This disintegration culminates in the Drag Queen hinting at some untoward aspects of the Doctor's own history--precipitating the aforementioned metallic-gray-suited dance from Lawrence. He collapses under the stress of it all and then becomes, quite simply, possessed. His motions start to appear anguished and jerky, he circles the floor as though one foot were nailed down, and he begins to speak in tongues. His breakdown actually seems to hurl him back through time, back to slavery, back even to Africa. "I didn't grow up in no ghetto," he calls out, moments before slipping into a Stepin Fetchit accent, saying, "I'm a good Negro. Yessir, massa sir, I'ma pass my orals and be a good educator and stuff alla my despair inna tiny little box!"

As the Doctor staggers about the stage, moaning and shouting, the rest of the cast joins in with African chants. The scene is strange and arresting, unlike anything that has preceded it in the production; for that matter, it is unlike anything I have ever seen onstage. After the doctor's collapse, the actors no longer seem to be performers in a production. Rather, they seem to be survivors of some terrible catastrophe, and they band together, telling their stories and leaning on one another for support.

Djola Branner confesses that when he wrote the script for *The House that Crack Built*, he wanted the audience to feel that the events onstage were genuinely at risk of collapse. And true to that ambition, the production does not merely implode, it self-immolates.

Those familiar with Branner's work in the Twin Cities--he has resided here for six years, after initially moving from San Francisco to live with dancer and cabaret host Patrick Scully--will not be surprised that the playwright has taken this deliberately precarious approach to telling the story of crack cocaine. "Postmodernism is strong in me," he says, a fact embedded in the name of his 1980s and '90s performing troupe Pomo Afro Homos. As a writer, Branner clearly enjoys toying with structure and exploding clichés. Branner's script for *The House that Crack Built* begins with archetypes--characters named "Poet" and "Doctor"--and though that's usually an ominous sign in a drama, Branner's characters refuse to remain clichés, or even to remain nameless. The Doctor insists on referring to one of the characters by the absurd title "Girl From the Ghetto," prompting one of the musicians to rebel. "LaToya!" the musician cries out. "Did you even know she had a name?"

Unlike the Doctor character, who grows increasingly frazzled as his show-within-a-show falls apart, Branner seems delighted by the play's curious meltdown. The playwright returns to the theme of rebellion again and again, stubbornly refusing to examine addiction through clinical or sociological lenses. Instead, he takes us right into the desperate, contradictory world of the addict. The drug users decline to serve as supporting characters in the story of the drug. Rather, they insist that they are the

main characters, and that their particular experiences demand attention.

Branner began work on *The House that Crack Built* in 1996, sitting in on 12-Step meetings at the invitation of friends. There he listened quietly to the stories of a variety of addictions, from alcoholism to sex. The structure of these meetings lurks in the play itself, with its confessional format and communal approach. "It's a new type of theater," Branner jokes. "Twelve-Step theater."

"We opened this season with the second part of *Angels in America*," Pillsbury House producer Noël Raymond says, joining Branner after the rehearsal to talk about the production. "This seemed like a perfect companion." And indeed, both plays use a fragmented narrative structure and multiple personal narratives to explore their complex social themes. And both are relatively small-scale productions that nonetheless behave like epics. *Angels* pours dozens of characters onto its stage (created by a small cast playing multiple characters) and takes them to such varied locations as Washington and Antarctica, while *House* seems at times as though it were a Broadway musical. Imagine, if you will, *Rent* if the cast ceased performing after a half-hour, sat down, and just decided to talk everything out.

This collective experience seems a matter of directorial design in Pillsbury's production. Before the run-through, director Heidi Hunter Batz speaks to the cast about the group dynamic of the play. "The strength of this show is in its ensemble," she tells the cast. "The thing that I think is missing is still the collective feeling in the room, the moment-to-moment things that are happening. The focus of the ensemble needs to be on your relationship with your addiction."

Throughout the rehearsal, the cast struggles to make connections with one another. At this point, still several days before opening, these moments consist mostly of eye contact, facial expressions, and whispered comments. When the bass player interrupts the Doctor, he at first simply snaps at the man. Soon, though, he looks around wildly to see how the others are responding to his interruption. The Girl From the Ghetto (LaToya, rather) sneers at the other cast members, while the Poet alternately waggles his eyebrows and thrusts his hips salaciously or expels air dismissively.

This ensemble quality echoes Branner's previous work, such as his recent *Mighty Real: A Tribute to Sylvester*, which used dozens of characters to retell the life of the Seventies disco icon. Branner is intrigued by such parallels, leaning forward to hypothesize on the thematic continuities from his last piece to this one. (Branner typically is a bit guarded in conversation, talking about his biography with an economy of words. He answers a question about the reasons for his move to Minneapolis with a smile and the word *love*--and declines to elaborate. Branner and Scully, it seems, no longer live together.) Certainly *The House that Crack Built* continues Branner's ongoing response to his "sickness at seeing one-dimensional gay men" in the media, as he puts it, which dates back to his Pomo Afro Homo days.

Another consistent component in Branner's work is the reliance on first-person narratives, as well as the extensive use of music. In fact, the most compelling moments in both *Mighty Real* and *The House that Crack Built* have a specifically gospel feel to them. "I think there is something to that," Branner says. "A friend of mine told me that there's always an altar in my plays," Branner says, grinning--an artful preacher caught in the act of enjoying his pulpit. "That altar seems to be growing."