



Between the Lines: An Interview with Djola Branner **By Priscilla Page, Program Curator**

In September, New WORLD collaborated with the Department of Theater at the University of Massachusetts Amherst to present our fourth annual Community Spirit Showcase. This year our showcase featured Djola Branner. He is the newest member of the theater faculty at Hampshire College and one of the founding members of the acclaimed performance troupe Pomo Afro Homos. *sash & trim*, his latest creative endeavor, is an ensemble piece that Branner wrote and in which he performs one of the central roles. NWT was pleased to support the development of this new play with an early reading in June and a workshop presentation this fall. We also had the honor of bringing seminal theater artist Laurie Carlos in for an extended Five College residency to direct this presentation. Hampshire College students Terell Carl Richardson and David Donnella and local artists Irene Thornton and L'Kuicha Parks, director of Jelupa Productions, rounded out the cast.

Recently, New WORLD's Program Curator, Priscilla Page spoke with Djola Branner about *sash & trim* and his creative process.

Can you talk about the decision to write this piece, and your use of autobiography throughout your career as a writer and performer?

Initially, I intended *sash & trim* to be a companion piece to *sweet sadie*, a one-man show I wrote about my mother and performed over a decade ago. I had been looking for some venue to explore my relationship with my father, and to showcase the incredible legacy of his music. Like so many fathers, he was torn in ten different directions at once - but the biggest tension in his life seems to have been his sense of obligation and his desire to lose himself in his art. That tension is something I believe was passed on to me ... for a very long time at least. The surprising thing, once I starting writing, was that Sadie had more to say, and that Anne [my father's second wife] had things to say as well, and that this was not going to be a solo show. Well.

Hopefully, what I've crafted is a play that explores the reconciliation of my father's tensions within myself, despite the fact that he was never able to resolve them within himself.

What is your approach to theater-making and performance?

I start with an idea, and use music, movement and text to develop that idea. Writing drama has always been that way for me. Because I started as a poet and a dancer, I've never been able to write a play solely with text. One of the reasons Laurie Carlos was so

right for this piece was because she integrates breath, gesture and music in the language of any theatrical work.

What brought about your decision to pursue theater?

One of the most compelling reasons I became a theater artist was because I wanted to see reflections of myself on stage. Every once in a while there were images of black women and black men, but these were rarely the men and women I had encountered in my life. And there were never black gay men unless they were clowns or caretakers or con men. Thankfully, Brian Freeman, co-founder of Pomo Afro Homos, had the audacity to suggest that he, Eric Gupton and I script our own stories and stage them. So storytelling has been about affirming my own experience, about witnessing the experience of people whom I admire and draw strength from - people who have historically been absent from the stage. It is also about deconstructing and re-appropriating my own image.

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