



“As I Walk I Remember”

REFLECTIONS ON *STOOP STORIES* BY Dawn Monique Williams

The island of Manhattan runs approximately 13.5 miles long and is about 2 miles wide. It has a story: an origin story passed down through generations of Munsee Lenape, the first peoples to inhabit the land; a history—of conquest, walled streets, slave markets, Seneca Village, destruction, erasure, national tragedy; and a history of pride, progress, resilience. Manhattan holds many of our nation’s most painful stories, and some of our most sacred. And those 22 square miles of land is home to close to 2 million people; each of them with a story too. Dael Orlandersmith deftly reminds us there are untold and forgotten stories just under our feet as she brings to life over a half dozen characters in her original solo play *Stoop Stories*.

Born Donna Dael Theresa Orlander Smith Brown in 1959, in New York City’s East Harlem, Orlandersmith’s turbulent childhood—losing her father at three years old, living in run-down public housing, and navigating a perpetually rocky relationship with her mother—fuels her plays. Her first play, *Beauty’s Daughter*, a solo performance piece, rich with autobiographical fragments, premiered Off-Broadway at the American Place Theatre in 1995. Earning her poet’s voice the attention of theatre critics, Orlandersmith won a 1995 Obie Award for the play. While often incorporating elements of biomythology in her plays, (*Stoop Stories* for example begins in her birthplace), she warns that her plays are not meant to be read as autobiography. These are not documentary or verbatim works (like those of Anna Devereaux Smith). These are composite characters, like a quilt: fragments of memory and knowing and imagination stitched together. Already a lover of literature and a novice poet, at age 15 Orlandersmith turned to acting. She went on to Hunter College but dropped out to pursue more dedicated actor training. All the while, she auditioned, waited tables, and wrote poetry. It became clear to her in her 20s that she wasn’t a favorite among casting directors saying, Orlandersmith says she “doesn’t do pretty,”

she recognized that she was not “eye candy” and that roles for her type —tall, substantial, dark skinned Black woman—were few. She sought out opportunities to read her poems. She began performing her poems at the Nuyorican Poets Cafe, and as she was exposed to other poet-playwrights like Ntozake Shange (*For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow is Enuf*), and Miguel Piñero (*Short Eyes*), she began to merge poems with her sketches of people— real and imaginary—and through these began to tell the stories she was most interested in.

Viewing herself as a citizen of the world, Orlandersmith has said in interviews, “my own curiosity took me to other places: where—passed 96th street—where I would just see, and drink up, and eat—read, it all.” “I’m interested in people that are invisible,” says Orlandersmith. “What are their stories?” It is no surprise then that an early influence on her work was Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*. “When I read Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*, I realized I wasn’t crazy,” Orlandersmith shares. Tackling topics like racism, sexism, and addiction, Orlandersmith is also heavily influenced by Edward Albee and Eugene O’Neill, favoring the stories of our invisible neighbors, the darkside of our humanity, the solitary figure, and the things we bear internally as individuals and communities.

Her plays include: *Black n Blue Boys/Broken Men, Forever; My Red Hand, My Black Hand; Raw Boys; The Blue Album; Bones; and Horsedreams*. Her most recent work, *Until the Flood* (2016), dealing with the murder of Mike Brown and the subsequent protests in Ferguson, MO, was commissioned by and premiered at The Repertory Theatre of St Louis. Chicago’s Goodman Theatre (where Orlandersmith is an Artistic Associate) is streaming their production of *Until the Flood* free through the fall of 2023. She is the recipient of a New York Foundation for the Arts Grant; the Helen Merrill Award for Emerging Playwrights; a Guggenheim award; the 2005 PEN/Laura Pels Foundation award for a playwright in mid-career; and a Lucille Lortel Foundation Playwrights Fellowship. She was a Pulitzer prize finalist for her 2002 *Yellowman*.

Jim Nicola, artistic director of New York Theatre Workshop where Orlandersmith developed many of her early plays, is quoted in *American Theatre* magazine as saying, Orlandersmith “is such a powerful presence onstage physically and spiritually, so you want to know who that is and what she has to say. And then she turns out to be an extraordinary poet of the complexities of life.” She does put a little of herself in each of her plays—after all, she has been an actor in each premiere. She details the complexities of her own biography in *Forever*, in which she forces herself to confront the rape and sexual assault she experienced as a teenager, and truly explores the troubled relationship she had with her mother. *Stoop Stories*, while not autobiographical, is no different: She illuminates the lives of the New Yorkers she knows, she tells the stories of the land she’s on. What a way to acknowledge the land. What a way to honor the ancestors.