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ADAPTING TO *EDA*: EMBRACING CHANGE AND ACTING ACCORDINGLY

By
Tia LeShaun Davis
B.A., Berea College, 2007

A Thesis
Submitted to the Faculty of the
Colleges of Arts and Sciences of the University of Louisville
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts in Theatre Arts

Department of Theatre Arts
University of Louisville
Louisville, Kentucky

May 2015

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A Thesis Approved on

April 17, 2015

by the following Thesis Committee:

Dr. Amy Steiger

Professor Nefertiti Burton

Dr. Karen Chandler

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to God and my ancestors. To my caring brother, Zion Fowler and my loving sister, Imani Austin. It is also dedicated to my rock star mother, Theresa Davis, devoted father, Dwayne Fowler and my phenomenal grandmother Alice Lovelace. Finally, this thesis is dedicated to the mentors who have pushed me to go the extra mile.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to acknowledge and thank Professor Nefertiti Burton, director of *Eda*, for her leadership, dedication, artistic vision and giving spirit; My thesis Advisor, Amy Steiger, for her support, guidance, attention to detail and patience; Dr. Karen Chandler for her sound criticisms, time and energy. I would like to express thanks to my mentor, Adanma Barton for encouraging me to pursue my master's degree at the University of Louisville. Thank you to the cast and crew of *Eda* for your resilience and hard work. Many thanks to the family members who continue to inspire me to walk my own path. A special thank you to my aunt, Dreama Gentry, and uncle, Hasan Davis, for their unwavering support. To the friends who have spent long hours laughing, talking and deliberating about life, I say thank you. I would also like to thank my M.F.A. graduating class, Takayla Williams and Travis Stolp along with my UofL department family. To the many loving hands that helped to nurture and support me through the good and not so good times, I say thank you. Let it be known that words cannot express the fullness of my gratitude or my love.

Because of you I am truly blessed.

ABSTRACT

ADAPTING TO *EDA*: EMBRACING CHANGE AND ACTING ACCORDINGLY

Tia LeShaun Davis

April 17, 2015

This thesis serves to argue the importance of being able to embrace, promote and adapt to change in the pursuit of becoming a well-rounded artist. This thesis will chronicle my beginnings as a performing artist and show how the physical, spiritual and personal education I received from specific theatrical companies and academic institutions prepared me for my thesis roles and various production responsibilities in the University of Louisville production of *Eda* by Obotunde Ijimere, translated by Ulli Beier and directed by Nefertiti Burton. My education and willingness to embrace, promote and adapt to change allowed me to successfully immerse myself in the world of *Eda*, create a dyad of contrasting characters, uphold my duties as a choreographer, develop a deeper understanding of Yorùbá religion and take substantial steps towards becoming a well-rounded artist. After highlighting the foundations of my education this thesis will explore the world of *Eda* and show the various methods and lessons that helped to guide my work as a performer and as an instructor. After which this thesis will present how the Yorùbá religion that informed our work in *Eda* has enhanced my life and reinforced my desire to continue to use the arts to promote positive communal/global change and continue on my journey of becoming a well-rounded artist.

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INTRODUCTION

We built towers that touched the sky/ mocked the birds and we learned to fly/ we built chariots that moved like fire/ but nothing has quenched our desire/ so we walk on and on and on these troubled roads/ backs bent heavy and worn/ stumbling through this life/struggling to get by/ and always yearning for something more/ this human experience/ is this what the maker meant/ trying to make a difference while searching for deliverance. - “Towers” by The Freddie Hendricks Youth Ensemble of Atlanta

Life is a culmination of circumstances and choices, unpredictable and forever changing. In order to engage fully in the gift that is life, one must accept and adapt to change. My artistic journey was propelled into action days after hearing the news of a horrific accident that occurred on August 26, 2001. Little did I know that the choice I would make as a result of that devastating event would lead me to where I am today, writing this thesis as an MFA candidate in Performance at the University of Louisville.

I come from a large family that believes strongly in the power of community outreach and teaching through the arts. Instead of focusing solely on individual gain and promotion, I was taught the importance of giving and providing for my family, friends and community at large.

Every life, every human, every artist has their own journey. My journey led me to taking part in the University of Louisville production of *Eda* written by Obotunde Ijimere, translated by Ulli Beier and directed by Nefertiti Burton. *Eda* is a Yorùbá adaptation of the morality play *The Summoning of Everyman* by author(s) unknown. For the production of *Eda*, I was entrusted with the contrasting roles of Iku and Bisi. Iku is the Yorùbá spirit of death, and Bisi is the female companion of Eda. I was determined to implement different methods and practices to create clear and concrete vocal and physical distinctions between the characters Iku and Bisi. In addition to performing on stage, I served as the choreographer for the production.

My skill set and background is heavily influenced by ensemble work. The production of *Eda* helped me to further embrace my ensemble mindset and at the same time take center stage. The Yorùbá system that informed our work in *Eda* overlaps in many ways with my past and reflects some of my beliefs in regards to community and ancestry. In the Yorùbá belief power flows from different sources. The main sources of power are the individual, the community and spiritual connection. I had the opportunity to draw from all of these different sources to help bring the production of *Eda* to life. Our ensemble had various levels of movement skills and abilities. It was my responsibility to provide appropriate movement that enhanced the world of *Eda* to the standards set by our director, Nefertiti Burton.

This thesis will show how the physical, spiritual and personal education I received from specific theatrical companies and academic institutions prepared me to successfully immerse myself in the world of *Eda*, create a dyad of contrasting characters, uphold my duties as a choreographer, develop a deeper understanding of Yorùbá religion, adapt to

various changes/challenges, and take substantial steps towards becoming a well-rounded artist.

My overarching goal for the production of *Eda* was to show proper respect for the Yorùbá religion and Yorùbá culture. First I strived to understand the beliefs and practices of the Yorùbá people then I sought to create a theatrical experience that would not only entertain but also educate and inspire others to want to learn more. Implementing different theories and practices enhanced my physical and vocal performance, allowing me to engage with the world of the play on a spiritual and mental plane. Being raised and educated in various artistic/diplomatic environments helped to establish the open mind I would need to adapt to the world and work of *Eda*.

EARLY EDUCATION/ FINDING MY VOICE & BODY

An education that teaches you to understand something about the world has done only half of the assignment. The other half is to teach you to do something about making the world a better place.

- Dream the Boldest Dreams, Johnnetta B. Cole

I was born and raised in Atlanta, Georgia, and I have always had a passion for the arts in all its many forms. I am blessed to have a family of creative leaders, activists and artists. From an early age I was taught the importance of expression. I would watch and take note of my family members as they engaged the world in different ways using spoken word, activism, illustration, design, creative writing, theatrical performance and music composition to inspire and promote positive change.

My mother, Theresa Davis and father, Dwayne Fowler, make sure that my siblings and I always had a roof over our heads or food in our bellies. As a child I would always watch my older sister, Imani Austin, and learn from her actions. She taught me more than she will ever know. Being that my family was so expressive, I developed a desire to give to the ones I loved. I would give in deeds, in gifts, words of affection and time. My giving often took shape in drawn artwork and poetry. As I grew older I would begin to give using dance, spoken word and performance.

Horizons

I attended Horizons school from kindergarten to my senior year in high school. During that time, I had the chance to be taught by a great number of my family members, such as my mother, my father, grandmother, two of my aunts and one of my uncles. Lorraine Wilson, the principal for Horizons until her passing in 2002, was a fascinating woman. Although she was legally blind, you never would have known it if you met her. She worked over 20 years of service helping youth with her commanding presence and dedication to community. She provided a great deal to my family in regards to opportunities, and I am eternally grateful to her for doing so.

On average we had about 60 students in the elementary program first through seventh grade, and 60 students in the high school program. The school, built by students, had an international program that allowed for students from all over the world to come and study at Horizons. I have had the opportunity to meet and befriend many people from many different walks of life. The teachers in the elementary/middle school program were very giving and nurturing. I cannot go on without mentioning teachers like Cindy Taylor, Sally Gustin and my mother, Theresa Davis, who helped to forge my academic foundation and push me to go beyond what was required.

In high school I was introduced to a different way of thinking. Teachers like Lorraine Wilson, Bruce Webb, Amir Sulaiman, Priscilla Smith, Martha Rummel and the late Doug Latham pushed me academically. My instructors had a genuine desire to help young growing minds reach their best potential. There were times when I did not give my best, and when I slipped they were there to talk and guide me back to standing. At Friday meetings everyone was welcomed to make announcements for the community to know

about and/or debate upon. These meetings gave us the opportunity to articulate our thoughts and come up with solutions to our own problems. We also had disciplinary councils, which consisted of student elected representatives who, when called upon, would help to decipher appropriate consequences for students who made infractions against the community rules. I was a part of the council for a few years, and while I served I learned the importance of forgiveness, patience and listening to all sides of a story.

There are two annual theatrical productions that take place in the student built theatre space of Horizons. Those productions are *I, Too, Am America* and *More Than Just a Word*. *I, Too, Am America* was a production centering on the theme of social justice. *More Than Just A Word* was a showcase of student written and produced dramatic, spoken word and dance pieces. I participated in these productions every year while attending high school at Horizons. Through working on these productions I had the opportunity to learn about the things needed to put on a production. It was a training ground for me in regards to working behind and on stage.

There are those who may think that attending such a small school would put me at a disadvantage. I disagree. No, I did not receive the traditional American “high school experience,” but I did gain a number of skills from unique opportunities that presented themselves. For instance we did not have the “organized” events that take place in the average American high school setting. If you wanted something to happen at Horizons you had to put together a plan, execute the plan and make it happen. If we wanted a prom we had to raise the money, find the venue and plan the event ourselves. We had to be our own advocates for change. We could not wait for things to happen; we had to use what

resources were available and forge new projects/create new opportunities for ourselves. I am very grateful for the high standards presented before me, and even more so for all the people who took the time to help me along the way.

Giwayen Mata

Giwayen Mata, one of Atlanta's most treasured companies, is a phenomenal all-women troupe of dancers, percussionists and vocalist composed of extraordinary artists and community leaders. Giwayen Mata has performed all over the world giving life to everyone they encounter. Giwayen Mata literally translates as "Elephant Women" in Hausa. With their power and gentle nurturing nature, elephants are highly respected in their matriarchal social structure.

The founders of Giwayen Mata were trailblazers for being one of the first female groups to play the jembe drum on the stages of Atlanta. Giwayen Mata plays traditional West African rhythms primarily from Guinea, West Africa. Their dances and songs come from countries such as Senegal, Mali and South Africa. Many young people taught by these wonderful women have gone on to be movers and shakers in the Atlanta community and beyond.

I started with Giwayen Mata when I was in the 2nd grade. On Saturday mornings my sister and I would be dropped off at Sister Omelika Kuumba's house for rehearsal. It is because of Sister Omelika and her fellow instructors that I found my passion for dance and music. I can still remember the excitement I felt when I started getting calluses on my fingers and thinking that I was becoming a real drummer.

At first I only attended the workshops, but as my skill level grew I was invited to perform and represent with the company. I was exposed to the dynamics of performance and the joy of expression. In addition to coordination and confidence, my instructors endowed me with a sense of purpose. I was a consistent young member of the company until I went started 8th grade.

The Freddie Hendricks Youth Ensemble of Atlanta

One of the major foundations of my approach to acting and work ethic comes from the education I received from the Freddie Hendricks Youth Ensemble of Atlanta (YEA). YEA is a dynamic training ground for young artists and the South's premier African American youth theatre company. The company usually consisted of about 70 youth ranging from ages 8 to 24. YEA trains all of its members to dance, sing and act, while teaching the fundamentals of ensemble and solo performance. They perform original works that focus on communal and global issues.

At first I was a dedicated supporter. I attended many of the theatrical productions that were created and performed by a passionate ensemble of young people and found myself in awe of the talent and intellect they possessed. After I mustered up the courage, I started to attend Saturday workshops. I enjoyed going to the Saturday workshops, but at the time I did not think I had what it took to join the main ensemble.

The director of the company was none other than Freddie Hendricks, my mentor and one of my greatest inspirations. To hear Freddie speak about theatre or the arts is a thing of beauty. To have him as a director is a privilege and joy. I learned so much about dedication and love from his leadership. He truly wanted YEA to be a vessel for change

and he pushed us to be great. He believed in us and helped provide a safe place for us to express ourselves via the arts. There was no just getting by. You had to be invested in your work to make a difference, no ifs ands or buts about it. You trained and you trained hard. It was a thriving place for growth on a personal and communal level.

Charles Bullock, our choreographer, was an unstoppable force. He got us into shape and kept us there. He pushed us physically, vocally, and taught us to embrace our bodies and focus our minds. To this day I remember going “down the line” working on choreography. It was one of my favorite parts of Saturday rehearsals. We would line up at one end of the room and in groups of four move across the room after Bullock showed us a traveling dance move/combination. Adrenaline pumping, muscles aching, sweat dripping, voices laughing, drums talking and people shouting words of encouragement as you gave your all and danced like no one was watching, making your way through space while slowing down time, giving your all going “down the line.”

Debbie Barber, the current Executive Director of YEA, was a tremendous support system to our ensemble. We were truly made a family, an ensemble, because of dedicated people like Barber. She worked so hard to ensure we had what was needed to continue our work. She and other leading figures helped organize many of the family members of the ensemble and generate a great deal of our community support. Debbie Barber is also the mother of Jekonni Barber.

Jekonni Barber was a member of the ensemble who also attended Horizons school. He was like a big brother to me. I always looked up to him and he had such a positive and genuine soul. I cannot fail to mention he gave the best hugs. They were fantastic. He wasn't afraid to take the time to hug you, squeeze you and let you know that

he loved you. He gave so much of himself to others and seemed to have a resounding well of energy to draw from. I will never forget his beautiful presence, his beautiful soul.

On August 26th, 2001, Jekonni Barber was killed in an automobile accident. I cannot begin to describe the sense of loss that permeated YEA, Horizons and the Atlanta community. I did not believe it at first. I had only seen him a few days before when he had gotten into his car to leave from school. He was 18 and planning on going off to college to study music composition. Four people were involved in the accident, but Jekonni was the only one who didn't survive.

At a memorial service for Jekonni members of the YEA ensemble came forth and performed for their brother. One of the songs sung was entitled "Towers":

We built towers that touched the sky/ mocked the birds and we learned to fly/ we built chariots that moved like fire/ but nothing has quenched our desire/ so we walk on and on and on these troubled roads/ backs bent heavy and worn/ stumbling through this life/ struggling to get by/ and always yearning for something more/ this human experience/ is this what the maker meant/ trying to make a difference while searching for deliverance.

I remember this song in particular and the passion with which it was sung. I made a promise to myself by the end of the memorial that I would become a full member of the ensemble. Jekonni's love and spirit inspired me to pursue the arts with a passion. It was a time of grief and celebration for the gift of Jekonni Barber's life.

My YEA family taught me the importance of ensemble and friendly competition. We were competitive in the sense that we always wanted to bring our best to the table

and we expected everyone else to do the same. If there was a role open and your fellow sister or brother wanted that role, you had to earn it. They would not slight their abilities to give you a shot at it, and in turn they expected you to do your best to take the role from them. I did not experience any attempted sabotage in regards to competing for roles. I think it was this sense of friendly competition that helped to form this bond of trust and give the ensemble a beating pulse of life. We were always looking forward and pushing each other to take on different challenges.

Our performances were not about the individual; they were about the collective whole. My brothers and sisters believed in the ensemble. We worked hard together and took the time to nurture and hang out with one another. We forged bonds that would make us a dynamic force to be reckoned with. We pushed our bodies, minds and spirits to new heights all the while maintaining the heart of an ensemble.

I had the chance to be a part of many different performances while I was with the ensemble. There was one production in particular that affected me greatly, and even to this day I draw from the power of the production. The production is none other than *Soweto Soweto Soweto A Township is Calling!!* The YEA website states that, “*Soweto* is a powerful contemporary dramatic production written to acquaint young people with the social and political structure of Apartheid South Africa. This riveting play is the ultimate commemoration of the death of Hector Peterson, the first youth to die in the Soweto uprising of 1976.” The show lasted an hour and a half with no intermission. At no point do the performers leave the stage. It is a demanding piece on all levels.

Soweto was the first production in which I was required to do extensive character research. We did collective research as an ensemble as to our collective given

circumstances and history. It was up to each individual ensemble member to create their character's life and forge families, friendships and acquaintances with other characters from the ensemble. When we entered the rehearsal hall, it was agreed we became the character. Our rehearsal space became Soweto. We learned South African accents and had debates on the topic of Africans and protesting. We conditioned our bodies to be able to sing, dance and act without stopping for the hour-and-a-half production. During my time in YEA, I earned the opportunity to lead the section for *Soweto* called "On Tuesday." Earning this role meant the world to me because it was one of the roles I had seen Jekongi play before I became a member of the ensemble.

Being a part of *Soweto* was one of the most humbling experiences I have ever had. The power within that piece was unstoppable. *Soweto* helped me to establish a performance standard for myself. It has been a point of reference for all of my performance work to this day. Did I give all that I was capable of giving? Do I have any energy left when I leave the stage? Did I let my character move, breathe, think and live in the world of the play? These are just some of the many questions I ask myself in regards to my work as a result of being a part of YEA.

Without YEA I would not be the artist I am today. Although I am not currently an active member, I believe I am still a part of the ever-growing ensemble, and YEA will always be my family.

Moving In the Spirit

I knew that I needed to continue growing as an artist when I decided to leave YEA, so I enlisted the help of my family to help me find another program that could benefit

from my involvement and teach me more about being a creative artist. That program turned out to be moving in the Spirit (MITS). MITS, based in Atlanta, Georgia, is a nationally recognized youth development program that uses dance to promote positive change.

MITS is under the leadership of Dana Lupton, Executive Director and Co-Founder. Leah Mann and Dana Lupton founded the company with a vision to use dance to make way for social justice. Lupton provided me with energy and life. She was focused and driven to meet the company's goals and provide opportunities for the growing student population.

My first performance with MITS occurred at the Rialto Theatre. I played an ungrateful youth who was too concerned with wants and needs to see the world around her. My grandmother, Alice Lovelace, spoken word artist, poet and activist, had the lead role in the production. She guided me on a journey of self-discovery and led me to understand that connections with people are what make life worth living.

Shortly after the production came to a close, I auditioned and was admitted into the Apprentice Company. Apprentice Company is an intensive training program that teaches advanced dance technique and provides leadership opportunities for youth ages 13 to 18. As a member of the Apprentice Company I was taught by creatively artistic minds in modern, ballet, West African and lyrical dance. My first performance dance solo was with MITS. The piece was choreographed to Sam Cooke's "A Change is Gonna Come." Even though the solo was so long ago, I can remember how difficult it was for me to perform on my own.

I had a sudden and shocking realization that I was alone on stage and expected to hold my own. I had performed solo before, but never a dance. Dance has always been something I had done in groups or with my fellow ensemble. I believed that dancing in front of strangers alone was in a sense showing my soul. Being given a solo made me focus in on myself and critique myself in a way that resulted in aggravation. I wanted to be perfect. I had to let go of my ensemble mindset. I had to take center stage and not be apologetic for my work. I had relied heavily on the energy of others with my previous work. I approached my work with idea that ensemble came first. My humility hindered me from feeling as if I deserved to take part in a solo.

I remember being upset with my body and how I did not yet have the skill set or strength to move the way I wanted to. I remember feeling disengaged from myself by thinking too much about the technical aspect of the dance. I was not allowing myself to be. I was not allowing myself to take center stage and take charge of my own space. It took a while to get comfortable with my capabilities and my confidence. I had to embrace the fact that I still had room for growth and I could only do what I could do at that particular time. The struggle provides substance to the process. The struggle helped me to gain a sense of confidence that would later help me choreograph/create theatrical works for different directors/artists. I would face the same sort of struggle in the production of *Eda* when I would be entrusted to create and perform my own solo.

Undergraduate Theatre Training

After graduating from Horizons, I decided to embark on a new journey to a new state to continue my education. Berea College is a Liberal Arts Work College located in

Berea, Kentucky. All students are admitted on a financial need basis and receive a scholarship that is equivalent to four years of tuition. A critical portion of the workforce that helps Berea function is formed by the student population. It is required that each student work a minimum of 10 hours a week in various departments and organizations within or related to the college. When graduating from Berea, not only do you have employable skill sets, but there is also a better chance for students to graduate with less debt than that of a traditional American college. My uncle, Hasan Davis, and two of my aunts, Dreama Gentry and Shawnta Davis-Earwood, graduated from Berea College before my time there. One aspect of Berea that took me by surprise was the fact that there were established activities/groups and sports. I was intrigued and amazed at the many opportunities that were readily available for engagement.

Being a part of organized sports allowed me to appreciate the idea of friendly and not so friendly competition. I was a forward for the women's soccer team from freshman to junior year, and the trust and connections formed were very supportive in nature. I was a track and field athlete my junior and senior year. Track allowed me to focus on my individual contribution and participate in-group competition.

As an active member of the Black Student Union (BSU) I was able to be enriched my awareness of culture and spiritual growth. I served as Vice President of the BSU my junior year and helped to organize different academic, communal and cultural activities under the direction of Tashia L. Bradley, former director of the Black Cultural Center. The Black Music Ensemble, under the direction of Dr. Kathy Bullock and the late Kimberly Wilson, reinforced my love for ensemble work while singing songs of praise and worship. Through the Entrepreneurship for the Public Good program I was able to

engage the community of central Appalachia with my cohort and explore the six core goals of the program: engaging complexity and uncertainty; exploring values and ethical structures; facilitating group decisions; recognizing opportunity; mobilizing resources; and advocating change. During my time at Berea I had the great opportunity of work multiple summers under the dynamic leadership of Diane Sales, Director of AileyCamp Atlanta. AileyCamp Atlanta teaches youth from ages 11-14 courses in dance, creative writing, personal development and communication. This innovative program teaches the importance of self-respect and uses the power of dance to positively impact the lives of the youth.

As for my theatrical/artistic training, I took courses such as Technical Production, Design and Production, The Principles of Acting and Theatre History. These courses offered at Berea helped to form the academic foundation of my acting journey. With the many courses, various extracurricular activities, and requirements to fulfill, I did not have very much spare time, but what time I did have was spent working in the shop. I was eager to learn more about all the workings that took place to make a production come to life.

I had the opportunity to perform in a Hidden Wounds Ministries Production during my junior year. In *The Misfits: Love Over Fear*. I played Tonya Kingston, a mother seeking to reconcile with her sons after years of abuse and turmoil. CeDarian Crawford, director and writer, led the production. We performed a few shows in Berea before taking the production to Alabama. The play dealt with issues of spirituality, family, betrayal, violence and forgiveness. Our cast and crew put a lot of work into making the production happen.

I played a Jet girl in *West Side Story* written by Arthur Laurents, music by Leonard Bernstein and lyrics by Stephen Sondheim. Rodney Clark directed our production, with Musical Director Stephen Bolster, Choreographer Stephanie Woodie and Assistant Musical Director Ryan Shirar. This production was a collaborative effort between the music and theatre department. I particularly enjoyed the experience because it was an ensemble piece that had elements of dance, song and acting.

I found expression in movement through the Berea College newly named Artist in Modern Motion's program *Kinetic Expression*. *Kinetic Expressions* is an event of modern dance choreographed by faculty and Modern Motion members that is performed for the Berea community at large. These productions provided a physical and mental outlet that not only helped me stretch myself as a dancer, but also gave me an outlet for stress.

I had the good fortune of working with GEAR UP and serving as a Residence Advisor during my time as an undergraduate. GEAR UP, Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs, helped me solidify my dream of teaching and creating a theatre program for the youth to promote mental, physical and emotional well-being through the arts. I was trained to work inside the schools to assist in educational programming and activities that would promote the growth of individual students on their way to postsecondary education. Dreama Gentry, Executive Director for Partners for Education, helped to provide opportunities to better enrich my understanding of the education systems. Gentry, along with my other GEAR UP mentors, challenged me to explore how I could use my skill set to give back to the community at large.

My position as a Residence Advisor prepared me to engage and communicate with my fellow students on an entirely new level. Being that I was sharing responsibility

for their well-being, I learned how to engage in conversation and address different disputes and issues. It was up to us as a staff to set an example for our residents and provide a safe, inviting and well-maintained dwelling for them to live in. We also arranged for activities and events to keep engaged and up to date with our residents. During my time as an RA, I formed wonderful bonds and friendships with my residents, and many of those relationships still have a special place in my heart.

For my graduating class's Senior Theatre Project, Professor Adanma Onyedike Barton guided us on an impactful theatrical and communal journey. After having discussions and researching about community involvement and domestic violence, we interviewed women from Madison County's only domestic violence shelter, Hope's Wings. From these interviews our class created a piece of work that raised community awareness about domestic violence. I was blessed to be a part of this experience. We actually had the opportunity to perform our piece for our interviewees. The show consisted of original songs, monologues, dances and ensemble pieces. I had the opportunity to choreograph an ensemble movement piece, which involved no dialogue and focused on the strong voices silenced by domestic violence. It was an emotional and life changing experience. Theatre can be a powerful conductor for change.

My senior performance role at Berea was from *The Death of the Last Black Man In The Whole Entire World* by Suzan-Lori Parks, directed by Adanma Barton. Parks is one of my favorite playwrights, and I find her works thought provoking and captivating. I played Black Woman with a Fried Drumstick and provided the choreography for the production. Black Woman would be the first and last lead role I would play in a main stage production as an undergraduate. Black Woman was the nurturer, always there for

her man, always trying to feed and provide for him. She witnessed all of his many deaths throughout the play and shared his struggle. She was a character of love and loyalty. I saw parts of myself in her and at first I was genuinely concerned about how the production would impact me. In the end it was a relieving release of my inner turmoil and struggle to give in to the character's wants and needs. I had to wade in her sorrows, rejoice in her happiness and breathe in her life. I used all that I had within me to bring her into being.

I first heard about the University of Louisville MFA in Theatre Arts near the end of the run for *The Death of the Last Black Man*. It wasn't until we started to run the production that I realized I was not entirely certain what I would do after my time at Berea. Barton introduced me to Professor Nefertiti Burton, Associate Professor of Theatre Arts and Associate Dean of International, Diversity, and Engagement Programs, after one of our final shows. We briefly discussed the Graduate Theatre program and the African American Theatre Certificate offered at UofL. I was excited about the opportunities that could come out of being in the program, and with the help of my family and mentors I began to make plans to pursue a Master of Fine Arts with a concentration in Acting/Performance. I graduated from Berea College in 2011 with a Bachelor of Arts in Theatre, ready to embrace change and find my path to Louisville.

AmeriCorps Kentucky College Coach Program

I served as an AmeriCorps Kentucky College Coach for one year before making my way to the University of Louisville. As a Kentucky College Coach I was trained to help high school students make plans for life after 12th grade. I was positioned at Berea

Community High School under the supervision of Eef Fontanez, Linda Taylor and Diane Smith. With the wonderful leadership from Family Resource/Youth Service Center, and GEAR UP instructors, faculty and staff, we formed a great team. Together we focused our energies to help the high school students prepare for life beyond 12th grade. From meetings, field trips, test prep to academic/career counseling and FAFSA readiness, we did it all. I also was assistant coach for the middle school and high school track and field team.

Berea Community helped to relight my passion to create theatrical opportunities for the youth. I cannot stress how important the arts are to education. I enjoyed every day of work as a Kentucky College Coach. “Blessed” is the best way to describe how I felt about the experience. The AmeriCorps Kentucky College Coach program, GEAR UP and Berea Community High School helped to provide me with an opportunity to be an advocate for change, and for that I am grateful.

While I was finishing my year as a Kentucky College Coach, I attended the on-site auditions at the University of Louisville for admission into the MFA Graduate Acting Program and was offered a scholarship in the program. I don’t remember very much about the audition because my nerves got the best of me that day, but I do recall the excitement in the eyes of the other auditioning hopefuls and the reassuring voices of the audition coordinators.

GRADUATE SCHOOL/ PROFESSIONAL WORK

Year 1

During one of the first Graduate Student orientation meetings, I remember sitting in the back row of the auditorium jotting down every word that was said and hearing someone say my name. “Tia?” The sound of my name caught me off guard, as I was pretty sure I did not know anyone present. I looked about and found myself looking into the smiling face of Takayla Justina Williams. Little did I know that Williams would become one of my closest friends and inspirations during my time at UofL. As the day went on I met my graduate cohort, Phoenix Jenkins, Robbie McCracken, Richard Ribuffo and Travis Stolp, and learned more details about the responsibilities and expectations of being a Graduate Student in the theatre arts department.

My first semester proved to be a shaky one. I was getting adjusted to my new position and getting to know the function of the theatre department as a whole. We had Acting and Movement with Professor James Tompkins, Voice with Dr. Rinda Frye, Playscript Analysis with Dr. Amy Steiger and Graduate Seminar with Dr. Russell Vandenbroucke. In addition to these courses my fellows and I taught sections of Enjoyment of Theatre class taught by Dr. Vandenbroucke and Professor Carol Stewart.

Each class had its own challenges and triumphs. Voice proved to be a particular challenge for me. Dr. Frye was very patient with my desire to “dance” the Linklater progression. In movement I appreciated Professor Tompkins’ attention to detail, and his

lessons would later assist me in developing certain elements of Iku in *Eda*. I found an unexpected creative outlet in Playscript Analysis with Dr. Steiger. We engaged in various creative design projects that challenged me to think in a different way, which would prove useful in creating movement for *Eda*.

Shakin' The Mess Outta Misery by Shay Youngblood, directed by Dr. Lundeana Thomas was my first production at the University of Louisville. I was listed as the sole choreographer for this production, but I believe Harlina Churn-Diallo was the true choreographer. I took note of her teaching skills and loving spirit and sought to bring the same life to my future projects.

I thoroughly enjoyed the teaching aspect of Enjoyment of Theatre, TA 207. We dove straight into leading and assisting students through the course. The Friday recitations were made bright by the energy of my students. It was interesting to balance my life as a student and a teacher in the program. Teaching in the morning, going to lessons throughout the day and participating in evening rehearsals enhanced my multitasking skills.

At the start of the second semester I was casted in Lynn Ahrens and Stephen Flaherty's *Once on This Island* directed by Nefertiti Burton. This production actually had three different directors, being that the production was a musical with dynamic dance sequences. Frank Goodloe was our choreographer and Troy Bell served as our music director. We shared the responsibilities of an ensemble by singing, dancing and acting to support one another on stage. We underwent many different changes throughout the course of the production and performance. I found that I had an easier time adjusting to the differentiations due to my previous experience working with YEA. The movement

and stamina required for *Once* only helped as I made my transition to be a part of the next production, *Sleep Rock Thy Brain*.

Sleep Rock Thy Brain by Rinne Groff, Lucas Hnath and Anne Washburn was a collaborative production between Actors Theatre of Louisville (ATL) and the University of Louisville Theatre Arts department (UofL). Both theatres put up the same three plays with two different sets of casts and two different directors. The one common factor between the two productions was the writers of the scripts. Dr. Rinda Frye directed the UofL production. What made this production unique was the use of flying effects. We underwent extensive training from the generous ZFX Flying Effect staff. We learned how to operate the equipment, ensure the safety of our ensemble, and execute the choreography of flying. You had to trust your ensemble. Your ensemble members were quite literally supporting, lifting and holding you up as you drifted suspended in the air. Whether you were flying or supporting, you had to develop a strong core as a foundation for your work. I had the pleasure of providing the ensemble and crew with physical warm up to condition our bodies for the production. It is a production that I will not soon forget. I learned the importance of focus, connection of the body/mind and trust.

Based off of my evaluations at the end of the year my instructors wanted more from me in regards to contributions and expression. My “silence” in the classroom was not meant to refrain from engaging in the work at hand. I was doing my best to take everything in. I am normally a quiet person and I was also brought up to listen twice as much as I speak. I could see how my silence could be taken as lack of engagement, and so I made it a goal to branch out and speak out more in the social and academic segments of my life.

Circle In the Square Summer Intensive

The summer after my first year of graduate studies I participated in a fantastic program. Dr. Lundeana Thomas introduced me to the Circle In the Square Summer Intensive Program (CITS) in New York, New York. Jody-Ann Henry, Renea Brown and I had the opportunity to audition for the program in New York City during spring break in 2013. We were accepted into the program, and when summer came around we headed up to New York to learn, explore and make connections. Takayla Williams took the place of Jody-Ann Henry, who had other obligations to fulfill for the summer.

Our arrival to New York was no walk in the park. We had some significant difficulties when it came to housing, and it took us a good while to adjust to the pace of the city. We had to embrace our struggles and act accordingly. The program was divided into two different groups, one for straight acting and the other for musical theatre. We took lessons in acting, voice, and dance. Our group consisted of twelve talented individuals.

I will never forget how the teachers of the program showed one another respect. One of the first things we were told was to take what we needed from each class. Each teacher had their own style, and that style was a result of different trainings and backgrounds. It would have been easy for them to hold their teachings above the other teachers of the program, but instead they encouraged us to take what was offered. “Don’t bring the teachings of another teacher into the classroom,” they told us, “Respect that each class will offer you a different experience.” This concept of respecting individual artists for their craft would stick with me long after my time at CITS.

Each teacher was a working artist having current information on what was going on in the theatre world. The curriculum pushed me out of my comfort zone and

challenged me to start something new. I could write a short book about the experiences my fellows and I had that summer, but alas our experiences there, although relevant to change and adaptation, are not the intended focus of this thesis. When we left the program we were known as the “Kentucky girls.” Circle In the Square made me question myself as an artist. Was I on the path to becoming a well-rounded artist? Was I continuing to stretch myself? How was I showing my growth? I left New York with a determined spirit. I could not just settle for what was given to me. I needed to take and create, give and support. I returned to Louisville with a new focus and desire to expand my creative nature.

Year 2

The start of the new academic year was an interesting one. Our cohort had lost two members one by choice, Robbie McCracken; and the other because of various circumstances, Phoenix Jenkins. At the end of the fall semester Richard Ribuffo ended up leaving the program. It took some time for me to adjust to those changes. I came into the program expecting to leave with the all of my cohort members. I know now that was wishful thinking, but I am thankful for the time that we had together at UofL.

I took courses in Movement with one instructor, Professor Erin Crites, Voice with Dr. Rinda Frye Acting with Professor Daniel Hill, and Approaching African American theatre with Dr. Lundeana Thomas. As a consensus, each of my instructors wanted me to give more of myself to the work at hand. I made a conscious effort to speak out more and engage my instrument, body and mind on a more expressive plane. My efforts were noted, but still I received encouragement to go further.

To fulfill my work duties I started teaching Acting for Non-majors and performing with the University of Louisville Repertory Company (Rep Company). The UofL Rep Company, usually consisting of four Graduate Students from the MFA program, performs two shows in rep for thousands of students, teachers and community member each year. Travis Stolp, Takayla Williams and Ashley Smith were fellow members of the company. I absolutely fell in love with the company's commitment to community outreach. For a good portion of the students, it would be the first time that they would see a theatrical performance. It was a wonderful opportunity to engage the community and spark the interest of creative or energetic young minds with theatre. We toured with the production of *The Magic Tree* written by Nefertiti Burton, directed by Amos Dreisbach, and *The Tempest* written by William Shakespeare, adapted by Dr. Rinda Frye and Directed by Andrew Harris. Being that there were only four of us in the cast and both of the productions required many characters, we often doubled to compensate for the needs of the production. Another challenge that presented itself was the type of space we could perform in. As a group we adjusted the shows to gymnasium floors, stages, libraries, classrooms, and cluttered corners.

My transition into teaching Acting for Non-Majors was a relatively smooth one. I received guidance from my professors and fellow graduate students to create a safe and productive working environment. Similar to my work with Rep Company, I had the opportunity to introduce to many students to the world of theatre. I approached the class knowing that not all of them would end up in careers directly related to acting, but it was my goal to provide them with skills to help them in life. Although I was the instructor for the course, I learned a great deal from my students in regards to determination and strength.

For the production of *The Tempest* by William Shakespeare, directed by Dr. Rinda Frye, I was cast as the character Juno. Juno would be my first Shakespearean role in a full-length production, but it would not be my last. It was during this production that Professor Erin Crites and Daniel Hill approached me to help come up with a trailer concept to advertise for the production. Ian Issitt, freelance professional director of photography, did the filming and editing. I was intrigued by the idea of being able to learn new skills, especially those in film and production. I was entrusted with the task of creating the entire concept for the trailer. Throughout my time at UofL I assisted in storyboarding trailers for the University of Louisville productions of *Dead Man Walking*, *Monsieur Baptiste*, *The Con Man*, *Gem of Ocean*, and *Sylvia*.

I played the Role of Saraphina, Diana's Grandmother's spirit, in *Monsieur Baptiste*, *The Con Man*, Roger Furman's modern adaptation of Moliere's *Tartuffe*, directed by Dr. Lundeana Thomas. Although the role required no lines, I was able to use my movement ability under the direction of Harlina Churn-Diallo. In the particular scene Dorinea calls upon the spirits of her ancestors in order to provide courage and strength to Madame Alvarez so that she can confront the manipulative deceitful hypocrite Monsieur Baptiste. The dance, percussive and soulful, utilized smoke effects to enhance the experience. One night of our production, the fire alarm went off during our dance. The cast, determined to provide an ending to the performance, decided to continue the play outside in the cold as we waited for the fire department's arrival. It was definitely a sight to see. The experience provided the audience with a unique show and the cast and crew learned a lesson in spontaneity and adjustability. We could have easily cancelled the show and sent away our patrons, but instead we were able to embrace the circumstances

that presented themselves and come up with a fun, entertaining alternative that would create a fond memory instead of a worrisome defeat.

In the production of *Dead Man Walking* by Tim Robbins, directed by Dr. Russell Vandembroucke, I played Marybeth Percy, a wife and mother trying to heal from the murder of one of her children by a man named Matthew Poncelet. This was the first role at UofL in which I had the chance to engage my character on a deeper emotional level.

In regards to welcoming change, I must mention the University of Louisville production of *Gem of the Ocean* by August Wilson, directed by Clinton Turner Davis. I auditioned for this production in the fall of 2013 and did not make it to the cast list. Instead of seeing this as a defeat, I decided to find a way to make it into an opportunity. I volunteered to be assistant stage manager for the production and was welcomed to the team. It was not common for a UofL graduate student to be an assistant stage manager for a main stage production, but I was determined to work with Mr. Davis in some capacity. I knew that I could learn from his direction.

In preparation for the position, I took on the role of stage manager for the production of *Mason Dixon* by Carolyn Gage, directed by Karen Edwards-Hunter. *Mason Dixon* was the final UofL performance for Dr. Lundeana Thomas and Dr. Rinda Frye. Both of these phenomenal doctors would be retiring at the end of the academic year. It was a challenge to establish my role as stage manager in the beginning but over time my assistant stage manager, Renea Brown, and I were able to fully take on our authoritative roles. Immediately after *Mason Dixon* came to an end, I joined the rehearsals for *Gem of the Ocean*, and I was given the responsibility of tracking the props used for the show. There were a great number of props.

Being a part of the stage management team allowed me to see the care that Mr. Davis put into the production. His understanding of the different elements of Yorùbá religion as presented in the production would later help me in preparation for embracing the world of *Eda*. Being that I was not a character in the production, I was not wrapped up in the world of character building, and as a result I was able to view the actors' growth from rehearsal to performance, from Theatre undergraduate junior Xavier Lee Bleuel, Citizen Barlow, taking on his first lead role at UofL, to MFA third year graduate Kristi Papailler, Black Mary, finishing off her final role. I am extremely grateful to have been a part of the process.

Kentucky Shakespeare 2013 Summer Season

I had the pleasure of auditioning for Kentucky Shakespeare Artistic Director Matt Wallace during a class final orchestrated by Professor Daniel Hill. From that audition I was requested to journey downtown for follow up auditions with Wallace and Amy Attaway. Later that semester, I was offered a summer internship with the company. It was so refreshing to work on a professional level with artists who genuinely loved their profession. I was in awe of the talent and comradely that presented itself during that summer.

We put on three free full-scale Shakespeare productions in rep at the Central Park in Louisville. I played Titania in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Queen Isabel in *Henry V*, and in the production of *Hamlet* I had the opportunity to play the Player Queen and understudy for Gertrude. If you had asked the 17 year old me, "Do you think you will ever perform Shakespeare?" I would have more than likely answered no. My experience

with Kentucky Shakespeare reminded me to not limit myself to what I think I am capable of. In order to keep growing, you have put yourself in situations that will promote growth, challenge you. Be comfortable with yourself and what you can do, but do not stay comfortable. You must keep moving. I was so honored to be able to give back to the community and grow with the cast and crew.

The summer proved to be a successful collaborative effort between Kentucky Shakespeare and University of Louisville. Charles Nasby, technical production manager at UofL, led a phenomenal tech and together we had a record breaking, rejuvenating, game changing summer season.

Year 3

Finishing up my final year at UofL, I took courses in Acting with Dr. Kelly and Professor Hill, and Movement with Professor Crites. I also took Introduction to Dance Fundamentals with Professor Theresa Bautista and Tools for a Global Theatre with Dr. Steiger.

I taught my last Acting For Non-Majors class in the fall term. I greatly appreciated the time I had with my students. Being their teacher allowed for me to share my passion for theatre, and in turn they helped to create a safe environment in which they could get out of their comfort zones. I also served my second year in the Repertory Company, as student manager, with fellow graduates Candice Handy, Byron Coolie and Casey Moulton. We toured with two productions. *Who Needs a Habitat Anyway?*, written by Nefertiti Burton and directed by Andrew Harris, focused on environmental education. *Mr. Peabody's Apples*, based on a children's book written by Madonna, was directed by

Erin Crites and written by the Rep Company under the guidance of Crites. *Mr. Peabody's Apples* focused on the power of rumors and the damage that they can do. Both productions provided audiences an opportunity to interact and engage with us on a new level. I greatly enjoyed the repertory process and the time spent with my fellow Rep Company members.

Before the end of the term, I will be creating a short film as a part of my performance project for this semester. I will be completing a multi media community service project that focuses on the movers and shakers of the Russell neighborhood in Louisville, Kentucky under the direction of Aukram Burton, award winning photographer and filmmaker. When discussing the best way to go about formulating and executing and planning projects, Burton shared a humorous and informative acronym with me: “Keep It Simple Sweetie/Stupid (K.I.S.S.)” I now use the K.I.S.S method in all of my personal, academic and professional planning.

My theatrical and academic education has taught me the power of patience, dedication, teamwork, integrity, activism and confidence. To achieve one’s goals, one has to actively engage change with an open mind and determined spirit. In the fall of 2014 I had the opportunity to use my education to develop a deeper understanding of the Yorùbá religion, uphold my duties as a choreographer, create a dyad of contrasting characters, adapt to various changes/challenges, take substantial steps towards becoming a well-rounded artist and immerse myself in the world of *Eda*.

EDA

The Yorùbá Religion

Before discussing the work and energy that went into the production of *Eda*, I believe it important to note some aspects of the Yorùbá religion. First let it be noted that my knowledge of the complexities of the Yorùbá Religion is limited. It is my hope that my effort to explain some of the religious aspects that helped to create the world of *Eda* will inspire others to conduct their own research and formulate their own understanding.

The Yorùbá, “a linguistic and cultural group of West Africa” (Abímbólá, 183), are one of the largest ethnic groups in Nigeria. There are many cultures of Yorùbá but they share one common language, which is also known as Yorùbá. The cultural region of the Yorùbá people is called Yorùbáland, which spans into parts of Nigeria, Benin and Togo. The site of humankind’s creation is called Ile Ife. Ile Ife is “the Yorùbá sacred city, the Jerusalem or Mecca of Yorùbá people” (Abímbólá, 176).

Wándé Abímbólá, universally renowned scholar of Ifá thought, Yorùbá mythology, and traditional culture, had this to say about the Yorùbá religion:

It is a religion in which humankind and the rest of creation co-exist side by side. Some aspect of the rest of the creation could be higher than humans.

In which case humans have to salute them, bow down to them, pay obeisance to them. In this sense, one will say that the Yorùbá religion, the religion of the orisa, tries to make the individual to be in tune with the rest

of creation, whether they risk creation in humans or any other form. It is not a materialistic religion, even though there are three things according to Ifá, which people are looking for in life...The blessing of material things is the least of the three. Then comes the blessing of children. The most important blessing is the blessing of long life, or to be in good health and to die in a good condition. These are the three objective of living here on Earth. (Abímbólá, 33-34)

The Yorùbá religion is not solely practiced in Yorùbáland/Nigeria. Abímbólá goes on to say that, “There are large groupings of Yorùbá people in Cuba known as the Lukumi, in Cuba” (178). The Transatlantic Slave Trade resulted in many Yorùbá-born and Yorùbá influenced African born captives being forcefully displaced and transmitted to North America and South America but the Yorùbá people kept their faith alive. The Santeria religions in Cuba, Puerto Rico and Candomblé in Brazil were influenced by the beliefs of the Yorùbá. Within the Americas the Yorùbá religion is often combined with another African, European or Native American religion. With that being said, there are many variations in Yorùbá religious practices, beliefs and terminology; including differences in orisa names, powers, responsibilities and histories.

The Yorùbá belief acknowledges a wide array of deities known as orisa. As Mercedes Cros Sandoval says in *Worldview, The Orichas and Santeria*, orisa “are immortal beings and generally the personification of the forces of nature and the patrons of human activities and professions” (181). The orisa live in heaven above and heaven below. Heaven above, similar to the Christian idea of heaven, is in the sky while heaven below is within the earth. Eshu, Ifá, Shango and Obatala are known for dwelling in the heaven above while all other orisa dwell in heaven below. The orisa in heaven below

when not in humanoid form manifest themselves the environmental aspect of the world such as mountains, rivers and trees. Yorùbá religion and Christianity are similar in that they both worship one God. In Christianity the father, son and the Holy Spirit make up the aspect of one God. In the Yorùbá religion there are over 400 different aspects of one God.

One can practice Yorùbá religion and not be initiated. To be initiated one must seek out a babalawo. A babalawo is an Ifá diviner, a priest of Orunmila (Orisa of fate). The initiation process is a sacred process that involves dance, song, prayer, sacrifice, the shaving of one's head and divination. Ifá is also the name of the central scripture of the Yorùbá people but also includes different knowledge such as the study of herbal medicine, history and genealogy. At birth one can be born into a family that practices under a certain orisa. That family's orisa will always be a part of them even when/if they are initiated under a different orisa. Once initiated one's body becomes a temple for an orisa to reside.

Babasehinde A. Ademuleya in his journal entitled *The Concept of Ori in the Traditional Yorùbá Visual Representation of Human Figures* had this to say about the Yorùbá Concept of having a soul:

The soul, to the Yorùbá, is the “inner person”, the real essence of being- the personality. This they call “ori”. The word “ori”, in contrast to its English meaning as the physical “head”, or its biological description as the seat of the major sensory organs to the Yorùbá connotes the total nature of its bearer... To the Yorùbá the physical “ori” is but a symbol- a symbol of the “inner head” or “the inner person”, the “ori-inu”(the inner head).

The Ori is sacred to the Yorùbá belief. It is the most important part of man. Ademuleya goes on to say how Ori is “the man’s personality soul, his guardian angel and his personal deity, which is elevated to the level of a divinity and thus worshipped by a man for things to be well with him”(216).

Olodumare is “the creator of the universe and the generator of the vital principle called *ase* that sustains the universe” (Falola, Childs, 292). *Ase* is a very important aspect of Yorùbá religion. *Ase* is “power, authority, energy, “to let it be””(Ajayi, 236). *Ase* is the life force of all things. Without *ase* nothing can exist. *Ase* is obtained by having good character that is gentle in nature known as Iwa-Pele. *Ase* comes in different forms. One is born with *ase* (personal power), one can receive *ase* through initiation (spiritual connection) and one can receive *ase* given by the community. One can have personal *ase* and not have spiritual or communal *ase* but one cannot live a full life without all three.

It is important to note that Olodumare would not deal directly with human beings in the way presented in *Eda*. Ijimere took some liberties with the structure of order within the play. Olodumare would however have direct interaction with the orisa.

“There are literally hundreds of orisa, ranging from the original and supreme sky deity Olorun to the local protective deities of regions, towns and villages” (Courlander, 5). Some of the most prominent orisa are Obatala (King of the White Cloth), Orunmila (Orisa of divination/fate) Eshu (Orisa of Chance/accidents/unpredictability/destiny), Ogun (Orisa of Iron), Shango (The Orisa of lightning), Oshun (Orisa of the Oshun River/Fertility), Yemoja (Orisa of the Ogun River), Oya (Orisa of the Niger river/wind) and Ibeji (Orisa of twins).

The orisa are classified into two groups, “orisa lile or orisa ele; and orisa ero or orisa tutu- that is, hot and cool deities” (Ajayi, 38). The hot orisa have a tendency to be

violent with volatile attributes, while the cool orisa are more controlled and judicious with the use of their powers. In *The Yorùbá Diaspora in The Atlantic World* Toyin Falola and Matt D. Childs had this to say about the Yorùbá religion, “The ultimate goal of the Yorùbá religion is to secure the benevolence and spiritual protection of Olodumare and the *orisa* in the human quest for peace and happiness on earth” (292).

Omofolabo S. Ajayi, author of *Yorùbá Dance: The Semiotics of Movement and Body Attitude in Nigerian Culture*, had this to say about the Yorùbá people: “To the Yorùbá, nothing is inherently and completely good or evil, there is a bit of the other in each. The emphasis is more on the co-existence of opposing forces where one, preferably the forces of goodness, can inform the other and life is a cyclical continuum of enriching experience of balanced normative values” (Ajayi, 41). Unlike the Christian and Islamic religions, the Yorùbá belief does not have a concept of hellfire. When one dies they are judged at the gateway between heaven and earth. Abímbólá writes that “If you did well, you will be rewarded, and you may come back again as an ancestor. Those who didn’t do well will not come back again, and will be lingering in what we call Orun apaadi. This is the nearest to the Christian hell in our belief” (Abímbólá, 35).

Iku, the spirit of death, is not an orisa but is Ajogun. Ajogun are warriors against humanity and the good forces of nature. There are over 200 Ajogun, but there are eight warlord leaders. Iku is “one of the eight warlords of the malevolent supernatural powers”(Abímbólá, 176). The other seven warlords are Arun (Disease), Of (Loss), Egba (Paralysis), Oran (Big trouble), Epe (Curse), Ewon (Imprisonment), and Ese (Afflictions) (Molefi, Mazama, 149). Iku is responsible for taking those who would be dead to Momo so that they can give account of their lives and be judged. Momo is the gate between heaven and earth.

I hope the brief section on the rudimentary aspects of the Yorùbá religion helped to show some of the different cultural and religious practices that were used to create the world of *Eda*. I also hope this brief glance into the complex and insightful religion of Yorùbá will inspire others to conduct their own research and formulate their own understanding. The research helped me to understand the place of the characters I played in the Yorùbá cosmology.

Preparation

In the spring of 2014, the first round of auditions was held for *Eda*. Takayla Williams and I would both be taking on our thesis roles in the production of *Eda*, and because of that our roles/responsibilities in the audition process varied. We both took time acting various roles with energetic actors. At the auditions that took place in the fall semester of 2014, Burton had the actors participate in storytelling sessions. The exercise emphasized the importance of listening, engagement of the body/mind, and trust. Each ensemble member would take part in telling a unified story using repetitive movement and touch to transfer control from one ensemble member to another. After the storytelling session I led a brief warm up and gave some basic movements for the actors to execute. It was important to Burton and I that the actors were able to use their bodies to add to the breath and life of the play.

At first I was under consideration for the role of Eda. I enjoyed the idea of taking the role, but after discussions with Burton and Williams we all agreed that Williams was a better fit for the main role. It wasn't until the second round of auditions that took place in fall of 2014 that I made a concrete decision on who I would be playing. Being that my

thesis role needed to have an added level of complexity, it was decided early on that I would take on two roles.

The first two characters under my consideration were Companion, beloved friend of Eda, and Olodumare, the supreme Orisa. I appreciated the dynamics of these roles, but I found a different combination to be more compelling. It was decided that one of my roles would be that of Iku, the spirit of death. I could see the potential for my growth in this character and the challenges that playing him would bring. Burton agreed and she went on to challenge me to take on the role of Bisi, the Harlot. Bisi was a character out of my comfort zone. She was a temptress, a cunning woman who knew how to console, nurture and manipulate. I had yet to play a character with her vibrancy within my time in the UofL theatre department, so I looked forward to the prospect. Bisi, raised in the Yorùbá culture and religion, would have a different presence to her. To give Bisi the appropriate power and confidence I would have to put effort into accepting my own ase. Playing her would prove a challenge in itself, let alone making sure that she was distinctive enough from Iku to complement the production.

By the end of the audition process our ensemble for the production of *Eda* consisted of thirteen members; Takayla Williams (Eda), Garrick Anderson (Olodumare, Fat Cousin), James Stringer (Sword bearer, Police officer), Colin Osborne (Sword bearers, Sule), Alaina Watson (Poor Neighbor), Tyler Madden (Companion), Shaleen Cholera (Babalawo), Savannah Arwood (Debtor, Owo), Chavon Lewis (Good Deeds), Diona Scott (Debtor's mother-in-law), Tamara Kamara (Binta the Cook, Sidikatu), Darren Harbour (Thin Cousin) and Tia Davis (Iku, Bisi).

Rehearsal

Before the actual rehearsal process, I started a workout program so that I could come in prepared to perform and teach. I started with running to improve my stamina. I also began preparing my instrument by doing Yoga exercises. It is true that a body in motion stays in motion. The physical preparation for this piece reminded me of the importance of paying attention to my physical well-being so that I can adapt to the situations that come my way.

One of the first things Professor Burton and I did to prepare was come up with a tentative dance/movement schedule. Burton was very generous in regards to rehearsal time for movement, and very forthcoming with her desires for certain scenes for the pieces. It was my duty to fulfill her artistic desires and at the same time provide the ensemble with movement that added to the production as a whole.

During dance rehearsals we began with a short warm up to stretch our bodies and prepare our minds for the work ahead. It was important to me to make sure the cast had more than enough stamina and breathe support to make it through the entire production. We would then go “down the line” to get everyone conditioned to traveling and moving with precision and purpose. I had one rule when it came to the dance. Never stop dancing! If you mess up make it a solo! At first some of the ensemble had difficulty not getting the movements exactly right, but with the encouragement of the whole, they realized that they were doing a great job bringing their personal touch to the movement. We established that there would be three main dance movement sections that would take place: the introduction, the party scene and the celebration at the end of the performance.

Burton decided that there would be a prologue to introduce the world of the play. The prologue, written by Burton, would consist of simple movements to enhance the

storytellers' words. Burton and I decided to let the ensemble create their movements to fit the piece. The Prologue was written as follows:

Welcome to a world of spirits/ Where the unborn, /the living, /and the
dead collide, / Where each of us must choose our fate before the throne of
Olodumare. /Orunmila! /Witness of Fate, /Reveal to me the future of my
own making. /Iku! / Warrior against mankind, / May the sacrifice I offer
here keep you from my door.

Each ensemble member was given the opportunity to create their own movement and I only assisted to fine tune or adjust the movement to enhance the intended purpose. I will speak more about the party scene when discussing Bisi's passion. For the celebration dance at the end of the piece, we envisioned a surge of energy that reflected the second chance given to Eda.

The line "Where the unborn, /the living, /and the dead collide" served as a reminder of how I came into the performing arts. The loss of Jekanni propelled me into making the choice to purposely engage in the arts. In a way I was born as a performer by making that choice and his presence remains with me even now.

As choreographer, I also had the task of finding music for the pieces. Burton and I discussed the possibility of having a live drummer, but at first we were unable to find someone to take on the position. In the meantime I utilized recordings of drumbeats and songs of master drummers for the rehearsal process. Then a wondrous event occurred. Burton found a master drummer to work on the production, Lafayette Cowden IV. I cannot express the joy I had upon hearing a live drum in the rehearsal hall. The addition of live music gave new life to the ensemble members. Omofolabo Ajayi writes in *Yorùbá Dance* that, "Music is an integral part of Yorùbá dances, there is no Yorùbá dance that is

not performed to some basic music, no matter how simple” (Ajayi, 34). Our blessing came with some difficulties, being that we had been rehearsing to a recording for a great deal of time, and it took a while for the ensemble to fully embrace the vitality of the drum. Percussion and drums by Cowden IV accompanied the majority of the production, but “the party scene” utilized the song *Beng Beng Beng* by the renowned Nigerian musician Femi Kuti.

Burton wanted everyone in the production to take on a Nigerian accent. I used the accent sheet from previous voice classes with Dr. Rinda Frye, utilized online resources such as movies, news interviews and dialect archives to improve upon my dialect. The accent placement was primarily in the mouth box or upper register of the voice. I would record myself saying my lines, and play them back so I could have a better sense of how I sounded, and take notes on how I could improve the rhythm of my speech. I would also practice conversations with my fellow ensemble members as we passed in the hallways or prepared for rehearsals.

In preparation for the roles I decided that Iku would have a learning, elongated vocal pattern in contrast to normal quick accented patterns of everyday speech. He would take his time and only use speed to evoke responses from others. Iku’s voice would be full and drawn out. Bisi on the other hand would speak in pleasing rhythms with an easy cordial tone. Her tone would be flattering, smooth and melodic.

For the characters of Iku and Bisi I used the elements of Tadashi Suzuki and Rudolf Laban teachings to distinguish my character work. In my graduate training I underwent a series of Suzuki exercise in Professor Hill’s classes, and exercises in the Laban Efforts with Professor Tompkins and Professor Crites. I also studied the works of both in classes with Dr. Steiger.

In regards to the use of Rudolf Laban's methods, I primarily used what are known as the Laban Efforts to bring the character of Bisi to life. The Efforts have to do with various combinations of physical movement that explores,

Direction (space), rate (time) and dynamic (weight). Different combinations of these efforts have been broadly categorized as follows-

- a light, indirect, sustained exertion- as in floating
- a light, direct, sustained exertion- as in gliding
- an indirect, sustained, strong exertion- as in wringing
- a sustained, strong, direct exertion- as in pressing
- a light, direct, quick exertion- as in dabbing
- an indirect, light, quick exertion- as in flicking
- a quick, strong, direct exertion- as in punching
- a strong, flexible, quick exertion- as in slashing. (Hodgson, 186)

My work on the character of Iku primarily focused on Tadashi Suzuki's methods as noted in his book *The Way of Acting*. Iku's presence needed to be inherently different from that of a human being, and so Suzuki's writings helped me to implement mental and spiritual change through physical engagement and awareness.

Iku's Strike and Bisi's Passion

My goal for the production was to bring Iku and Bisi into the world of *Eda* and present two distinctive individuals by using the two instruments at my disposal, my body and my voice. I primarily used the methods and teachings of Rudolf Laban and Tadashi Suzuki to achieve my goal. I wanted to fully engage my body and voice to execute my

roles with precision and confidence. In Suzuki's *The Way of Acting*, "Gesture is tied immediately to the words being spoken; indeed words *represent* human gesture. There can be no words spoken that are not intimately connected to bodily sensations and rhythms" (Suzuki, 5). In this section I will provide insight to my character development processes and explain the internal monologues of the contrasting characters of Iku and Bisi.

Eda, literally "human being" in Yorùbá, is a play about a human being who loses sight of his purpose and becomes infatuated with material earthly wealth. He neglects the promises he made in order to obtain his wealth and leaves his compassion and good deeds to die while enjoying the spoils of his hoarded wealth. Olodumare, the supreme Orisa, sends Iku, the spirit of death, to retrieve Eda so that he can answer for his actions. As Eda's world begins to crumble, he realizes the error of his ways and tries to make amends for the way he lived his life. He seeks to have anything or anyone speak to Olodumare on his behalf, but in the end he finds himself alone. As Iku strikes Eda down, his daughter Sidikatu gives birth to a newborn son. Eda is judged by Olodumare and is found worthy of a second chance at life. Eda is reborn into the world as Sidikatu's son to live a life of compassion and poverty.

Coming into this work, I had to ask myself some questions about my beliefs about death. I, an African American, Christian woman, was entrusted to portray Iku, the Yorùbá male spirit of death. Growing up I did not fear death until it hit close to home. There was a portion of my adolescence in which I felt the world was crumbling around me because of the amount of loss that was taking place within my immediate family unit. The deaths of my Grandmother, Barbara Fowler, and Grandfathers, Waymon Fowler and Jikki Riley, greatly impacted my views on life. I retreated in many ways, and had an overwhelming

sense of defeat. I questioned many things during these times and found the arts as a way of expression. I would draw, write and dance my anger, my confusion, my grief and eventually my joy. It took me a long time to embrace that death was an integral part of life. I had to appreciate the time I had in this world and accept the fact that change, like death, was inevitable. Those who go before us never really leave us. I believe there is still an ancestral connection with those who have passed on. I do not believe that their spirits are far away looking down upon me but I believe that they live on within me and aid me as I continue through life. As I mentioned earlier, when I was in YEA I had the chance to perform a role that Jekonni Barber played before his death. The experience was a spiritual one and I believe that he was with me as I performed. Iku's ase (power) can be intimidating and overwhelming, but he is a bridge to life. He provides Eda with a chance to return again, to live again. Iku, death is an eventuality and the beginning of something new.

Early on I was informed that Iku would be a masked character. The decision to mask Iku was greatly influenced by the fact that I would be playing multiple roles and needed a distinctive visual difference between them. The mask was a half mask, leaving my mouth open. The design consisted of earth tones of brown and black. The top was framed by straw in shades of tan and brown. The nose was off center, and the painting of the mask gave a double effect. One side of the face, upon first glance, the wearer seemed to be smiling, while the other seemed to be glaring with a loathsome glare. I did not have very much mask work before this production. I have attended workshops and participated in activities using masks, but I had yet to perform in a full production with one. It was very important to me that I let the mask inform my character. I did not want to work against it and create unnecessary confusion.

Being that the mask echoed two sides of Iku, I chose to make his personality match. He could be gentle like a breeze, then raging like a hurricane. Being that the mask presented me with varying extremes, I chose to make the physical characteristics of Iku off-kilter. He would be grounded, but at the same time unearthly. He had animalistic qualities that were equivalent to a serpent, bird of prey, and hunting lion. His pacing was slow and deliberate. Iku's robe was long and dragging with an elaborate array of translucent and jagged clothe with flashes of red between various pieces. The robe left Iku's arms bare. On both of his upper arms, two swirling golden cuffs and upon his wrist two black cuffs adorned with cari shells.

During one rehearsal Burton asked Cowden IV to provide a distinctive sound for Iku's entrances and exits. Cowden IV came up with a wailing that I believe fully captured the essence and nature of Iku. The wail was produced using precise movement on the jembe drum. The sound dipped and rose in a way that announced a sense of dread. The accent was played each time Iku entered or exited a scene. The distinctive nature of the wailing was a reminder and a warning to all that they were never alone.

Daniel Perez, scenic and lighting designer for Eda, provided Iku with a swirling, undulating green tinted light that followed in his wake. I believe the lighting complemented the spirit of death. It played with the already twisted shadows of Iku's face and personality. The slow travel of the light emphasized Iku's daunting patience and the consistent swirling movement of the lighting spoke to how Iku was active even in his stillness.

Iku also carried a club with which he would strike down his victims. The club was not merely a prop to swing around, it was an extension of Iku's self. There was a club that played an important role in the story of Iku and Eshu, the trickster orisa of fate. The

story of Eshu and Iku has many versions. *Tales of Yorùbá Gods and Heroes* by Harold Courlander provides one version on the story. In the story Iku sets out to teach Eshu a lesson after hearing about the way he was harassing people. The people feared that if they stood up to the orisa of fate, all would end in disaster. Iku sent out a message declaring that he would fight Eshu. Eshu heard of the challenge and expressed that he did not fear Iku and was ready to fight him. Orunmila, the orisa of divination, warned Eshu against the fight, but Eshu would not hear his friend. Orunmila arranged the fight, and people from all over came to see the battle of Eshu and Iku.

After taunting one another with songs of destruction, the fight began. It is said that Iku brought his sword and shield to the fight, and Eshu brought his club. Eshu tried but could not strike the swift and agile Iku. Every time his club missed Iku and struck the ground there were sounds of thunder. Every time Eshu's club flew through the air there were sounds of winds. "At last Iku seized Eshu. He threw him to the ground and wrestled the club from his hand. He raised the club over Eshu to kill him" (Courlander, 65). When Iku made to strike Eshu with the club and seal his victory, Orunmila interfered and took the club from Iku. In doing so, Orunmila saved his friend and Iku was thwarted. The story does not say what happened after the fight, but for my purposes I decided that Iku took up Eshu's club as his own. He keeps it as a reminder of his defeat.

Iku is never without his club during the production. In the first scene of *Eda* when Iku is introduced, he assumes the *doba'le* position when presenting himself to Olodumare. To assume the *doba'le* position means that one lies down prostrate with feet extended behind one's torso and the rest of the weight of one's body rests on one's hands. This is one of the customary displays of respect in the Yorùbá tradition. Even when assuming this the position, Iku does not release his club. The club remains firmly in his

hand, and even though he is bowing to one with so much power, he does not relinquish his own. Iku shares with Olodumare how much he enjoys striking his victims at their first meeting in the play:

I shall run through the whole world and I will visit all those who do not know your laws. I will find them, in every nook and corner of the world, those who have forgotten their promises made before they were born! And I shall strike suddenly and hard; and their eyes will break and their knees collapse, and their blood will curdle and without delay. They must set out on their pilgrimage (Ijimere, 49).

I decided early on that Iku would have a playful nature about him. Yes, he would answer to the beckoning of Olodumare. Yes, he would proclaim his allegiance. Yes, he would announce his mission as the will of Olodumare, but he knew that he was really the one in control. Death is a forever constant. He is necessary. He is without question or doubt. He is inevitable. Without him there would be no life.

In *Eda*, it was apparent that Iku gained pleasure by toying with others' emotions. He could be condescending and complimentary, but always playful. An example of this playfulness can be found in the first scene when Iku greets Olodumare. When Olodumare summons him, Iku's first words are those of praise to Olodumare. "My Lord, owner of the sun, owner of the sky, owner of the world. Nobody knows your father, The liars are only lying; Nobody knows your mother, The liars are only lying" (Ijimere, 49). In return for his loyalty and displays of respect, Iku is referred to as Olodumare's "most faithful servant." This pronouncement gives Iku a sense of joy.

Olodumare sends Iku on a mission to fetch Eda and have him “bring his book of accounts,” to answer for the life he has lived. The mission entrusted to him is a mission of joy. Even though Olodumare *sends* Iku to bring Eda before his throne, Iku still has control over the situation. The illusion of control is almost as powerful as having control...almost. For if Iku had no will to visit those who did not know his laws, no mortal would have to answer to Olodumare. Iku is the connector of the mortal world and the world of the orisa.

Iku’s movements were slow and deliberate. Being the spirit of Death, he knew that eventually all things would have to come to him. There was no rush. I worked to make his movements grounded, yet light. It was important to me that Iku not be stagnant. Yes, he had all the time in the world, but he was engaged in every moment of his duties. He enjoyed the fear and attention he received, and he flourished in the respect of his purpose. Iku, barefoot and poised, would glide about the stage shifting and swaying as he pleased. Being barefoot and connected to the ground reminded me of the quote by Tadashi Suzuki, “The way in which the feet are used is the basis of a stage performance. Even the movements of the arms and hands can only augment the feeling inherent in the body positions established by the feet” (Suzuki, 6). Suzuki went on to say that an actor could perform without feet, but to perform without feet would be inconceivable. With the articulation of my feet and the grounded nature of my steps, I was able to free my spine and extremities to emphasize Iku’s distinctive rippling swagger.

In contrast to Iku, Bisi is the life of the party and more sultry and open with her movements. Although the two never cross paths, they both shared a desire for Eda. Being that Bisi was the center of attention and promoter of good times, it was only fitting that she was adorned in vibrant and attractive attire. Bisi wore a sultry red buba (blouse like

shirt), iro (wrap skirt), Ipele/Iborun (shawl) and gele (head wrap). It was very important that her gele be the most elaborate one at the party to show her status and outgoing nature. The gold jewelry on her neck, wrist and ears further accentuated her style and ranking. The vision of costume designer Zhanna Goldentul was brought to life with the beautifully crafted dress. There was no mistaking that Eda was not afraid to shower Bisi with material wealth in exchange for her company, affection and attention.

The first thing you learn about Bisi upon reading the play is that she is a Harlot. In the character list at the beginning of the play and throughout the play she is listed as Harlot (Ijimere, 46). Only twice in the production is Bisi called by her name (58, 60). The name Bisi means first born in Yorùbá. From a general standpoint the first-born child of many cultures is usually the one who is praised and spoiled. There are subconscious and conscious connotations that are associated with the title of a harlot. One could quickly jump to the conclusion that she is only with Eda for his money and power.

The primary Laban Efforts that I executed to establish Bisi's personality through movement and vocal delivery were that of gliding and dabbing. Both Efforts are direct in nature, which spoke to her upfront and elaborate personality. Gliding, being sustained and light, provided a sensual edge to Bisi. While the dabbing effort, quick and light, spoke to her playful and charismatic side.

Eda provides Bisi with all her wishes and desires, and so she expects him to continue to do so. Bisi is the excitement in Eda's life, and so he gives her material goods to secure her company: "Let her go and buy what she desires and let her heart be happy when she comes. This money will get her velvet cloth, rekyi rekyi, Sarasoba scents, fine pomade, gold and silver...and so many other things a woman could use" (Ijimere, 51). Through Eda, Bisi has access to any worldly desires she can dream of.

When it is time for the party, Bisi arrives in a grand flurry of dancing bodies and resounding music. As she dances about, she deliberately displays herself in front of Eda in order to catch his eye. She makes a show of greeting her guests, letting her voice glide over the music: “Eku nawo O! Eku nawo!”(Ijimere, 58). When Eda mentions his age, Bisi replies, “Oh do not talk about your age. I have no interest in young boys and their corner love. They want to go to bed with you and can’t even afford to buy you a pair of shoes” (59). Bisi dabs these words upon Eda jokingly, imploring him to change the subject and return to the party at hand. The dab effort allowed Bisi to exert a playful kind of control over Eda.

Bisi also has a nurturing spirit about her. She loves Eda and doesn’t want to have him angered or unsettled. When Eda shows unease and discomfort, she chooses to try and distract him with dance and merriment. When Bisi speaks to Eda, she distracts him by soothing him with the glide of her hands and tongue: “I do not like the way you talk tonight. You think too much. You make me afraid. Let the band play to discard your worries!” (59). Bisi decides to dance for Eda and put on a show for the party guests who fill his house.

Bisi’s dance had many stages of evolution. At first it was accompanied by pre-recorded music then with the blessing of live drumming we were able to accent and control the pace and pulse of the piece in real time. As the choreographer, I did not take into account how tight Bisi’s clothing would be. At rehearsals we implemented the use of skirts for all of the women so that we would be accustomed to the mobility and function of layered cloth, but I failed to require a rehearsal skirt that mirrored the beautiful attire of Bisi. I also did not take into account the size/weight of the gele (head tie) and added element of the Ipele (shawl). The original choreography for the piece had to evolve to

incorporate the beautiful costume design. I believe I was successful in providing a moving piece while maintaining the integrity of Burton and Zhanna's artistic vision. For a few nights of the performance the Ripple (shawl) came off at inopportune times. In order to cover the fumble on one particular night, I took the shawl and playfully wrapped it around the neck of Eda who sat on his throne watching the festivities unfold.

Bisi, being the host of the party, showed care in her duties, gliding from here to there, providing an energetic and appealing environment in spite of Eda's growing dread. Bisi is quick to try and shift the attention from Eda's apparent dismay by gliding in and flicking away the confused nature of her guests. "Pay no attention my friends. My master feels feverish tonight, but he will soon be better. Eat drink and be merry" (60). However, Bisi's presence and charm are not enough to distract from the fact that Eda has withdrawn into his troubles.

Her attempt to find the source of Eda's problems is an attempt to save face and an act of affection. Bisi acknowledges that Eda is troubled and a definite internal wringing of dread compels her to try and press Eda into leaving the party and take refuge in the house. When Eda rashly refuses and proceeds to insult all of his guests he obliterates the joyous atmosphere Bisi worked so hard to create.

Time and time again, Bisi tires of pressing her intentions into Eda's understanding: "What foolish thought are these? Wake up from these dreams, I am here at your side and yours forever" (61). Eda ignores her affections and chooses to humiliate Bisi by putting her on display as the means of his unease. She attempts to glide away and fade into the background, but Eda forcefully begins to grope at Bisi as he berates her with his sharp words. "And if I asked you to follow me to heaven? Would you have the courage to follow me? To see your blood go cold, your knees weak; to see you break out

in sweat and make excuses and break your vow!” (61). Eda shoves Bisi away and she retreats, shamed in front of all of her guests.

This scene between Bisi and Eda evolved over time. The scene brings awareness to the issue of domestic violence/abuse and creates another barrier between Bisi and Eda. Bisi implores her guests to find a way to help Eda. Even after his displays of abuse she cares for him.

One party guest suggests dance as a means for a cure, and Eda takes the opportunity to apologize, but the apology has little effect on Bisi. The events of the night have wrung her dry of affection. Her once graceful direct confident glide becomes an aloof, floating, light, indirect and sustained lacking vitality and purpose. Before the guests join in a group dance, Eda attempts to take the hand of Bisi. Bisi lets her glance glide over Eda and she floats away to join the dance, leaving him alone.

The dance raises all of the spirits of the guests and the high energy seems to calm Eda. Bisi attempts to regain her composure and mill among her joyous guest and press the dread of humiliation way by dancing. This starts to improve until Eda hears a sound no one else can. “This drumming is strange, what can it mean? The State drums sound as in times of war, a deathly and fearful sound” (62). It is in the midst of this confusion that Bisi chooses to relinquish her duties as entertainer. Bisi recognizes that Eda has begun to lose the fabricated ase of his community, his guest. Eda did not attain the ase of his community through his good nature he attained it because of his wealth and worldly power. Bisi already aware that Eda doesn’t have strong spiritual ase, sees that what is left of the false communal ase is fading away. Bisi knows that it is only a matter of time before things fall apart. In addition to knowing that Eda is no longer receptive to her affections Bisi makes a choice to leave. Bisi starts to float away, and as she leaves the

eyes of her once beloved Eda, she locks eyes with Companion. A glimmer of a spark flies between the two, and Bisi's float becomes a faint glide. As Eda struggles with the voices in his head Bisi glides away leaving an invitation for Companion in her wake.

During the quick change between Bisi and Iku, I had to rely on my breath and connection to the ground to regain my composure. As Suzuki wrote in *The Way Of Acting*, "A performance begins when the actor's feet touch the ground, a wooden floor, a surface, when the first has the sensation of putting down roots; it begins in another sense when he lifts himself from that spot" (Suzuki 8). The change from Harlot to Iku had to be done in less than two minutes and required assistance from the production wardrobe crew. I relied on drawing energy from the ground to regain my composure as Iku. The Yorùbá Religion is a grounded religion in the sense that most of the orisa dwell within or on the earth. One night an audience member happened to be leaving as Iku was entering for the next scene. The patron was startled, to say the least, and made as if to punch or push Iku, but soon gained his composure. I was able to maintain grounded energy as Iku during the unusual interaction and make my way to Eda's home.

Iku decided to crash Eda's party at a point of elation. Eda felt as if he had banished his worries by ignoring the looming signs of Iku's approach. Eda again hears the terrible sound that no one else can hear, "a roaring, screaming sound, strange and yet terribly familiar. It called my name...There there again, I hear them calling 'Eda!'" (Ijimere, 63). Companion manages to calm Eda and just as soon as he regains his composure he hears footsteps. "Help, help my friends, I can hear it approach. Steps approach in, getting louder coming upon me from behind. No earthly being walks like that!" (64). Iku enters the space and announces his presence to Eda by calling out his name and criticizing his way of life. "Eda! Can you enjoy yourself, with music and drink

and harlots, and forget your creator?” (64). While slowly drifting through the guests, Iku deliberately fixes his attention on everything except the shaken Eda. Always moving with a loose spine and grounded pace, Iku makes wide arcs looking over the party guests. When Eda questions if Olodumare sent Iku, Iku responds with a slow twisting wringing of his free hand and Eda grasps for his heart short of breath and gasps, “Oh, it is so, it is so” (64). After Eda admits that he doesn’t know the messenger sent by Olodumare, Iku announces himself saying, “I am Iku, I fear no man. I spare nobody. When I am sent, I strike without mercy!” (64). Raising his club he frightens the party guests and some flee the house.

It was very important that Iku not touch Eda. When we first rehearsed this scene, Eda would literally beg at Iku’s feet, grabbing at his legs. The contact, although visually compelling, created a human connection that took away from Iku's otherworldly presence. Instead of touch, Iku uses an unseen force to cause Eda pain and bring him closer to his end. The gesture used to inflict pain was specifically executed with full body engagement. Iku’s free hand would extend out with an open palm towards his prey. Then Iku would methodically twist the wrist of that hand as his fingers compressed, clawing their way into a closed fist. This gesture represents the hand of death closing around the heart of his victim.

Eda pleads for more time and at first Iku refuses again moving with uncommon speed to clutch the heart of Eda. “Such requests cannot be put to me, when I approach a man, I strike him quick. I strike his heart without delay and he must follow me without warning” (65). Eda desperately requests more time to see which of his friends will accompany him, and Iku consoles his worries looking over the remaining party guests, saying, “No one will follow you- rest you assured” (65).

Eda pleads to live for just an hour more. It is only at this time that Iku uncoils from his stance of torment and comes to his full height, feet firmly grounded to the floor. He considers the request of Eda and playfully accepts. “So let it be. But use your time,” Iku grabs hold of Eda’s heart once more and crouches down as Eda writhes in agony, “For in one hour sharp you have to follow me and no more pleading Can help you then” (66). Iku releases his grasp on Eda and goes about his way with a guttural laughter falling from his lips, a sound of wailing in his ears and swirling green light in his wake.

Later when Eda laments the lost of his only true friend and protests the error of his ways, Iku appears in the shadows drawing his club up and over his head, dispelling dread as the sound of wailing is heard in the distance. Iku proceeds to pace along the outskirts of Eda’s home, careful to measure his approach as he draws strength from his own rhythmic motions. All the while, Eda meets his pregnant daughter Sidikatu as she comes to say goodbye. Eda feels the presence of death is almost upon him. “Curse me not, my daughter. I feel he is coming- Now” (73). Sidikatu seeks to comfort her father with words of hope. Iku, unseen by Eda or Sidikatu, slips into the shadows only to appear from another entrance. The choices to have Iku disappear and reappear added to the foreboding tone of the scene. Iku was everywhere and nowhere, standing beside you and looming in the far corner of a dark room.

After circling about the space, Iku creeps towards Eda with an eager grin and haunting presence. As Iku prepares to strike, raising his club high over Eda’s head, he hesitates when Eda calls out, “Iku, I am ready now...Let me but end this prayer!” Eda’s willingness to submit gives Iku a different sense of control and power. Eda acknowledged and accepted Iku as an unavoidable force, and because of this Iku begins to slowly lower his club. Eda is given some additional time because of his pronouncement, but Iku, eager

to perform his purpose, begins to raise his club poised to strike as Eda continues with his prayer. “Olodumare, owner of heaven owner of the sun! Bless the fruit which my daughter carries in her belly. Forgive my breach of promise and through her, grant me another beginning. Let me...” With a twisted grin and steady hand, Iku strikes and everything goes black. Sidikatu screams as she begins to give birth to her son and Iku takes Eda to answer for the life he has lived. It is at this point that the unborn, the living and the dead collide. Through Iku Olodumare grants Eda a second chance at life by returning to the world through his daughter as an infant. Sidikatu give praise to Olodumare for her newborn son, saying,

You gave us a new beginning! You will see another life: For Owo
(money) shall be banished from this child’s life: Greed and avarice and
lust for power shall be driven from his doorstep! For he has come back to
think again and to choose anew: If poverty sits on his head- he will not
care. If hunger hangs round his neck- he will not mind. If nakedness
uncovers his bottom- he will not be ashamed. For he has come to choose
wisdom- the pride of man (Ijimere, 77)

Iku and Bisi both shared a desire for *Eda*. In the end, Bisi flees from Eda, and Eda tries but fails to flee from Iku. Working on developing the movements and purpose of these contrasting characters was an enjoyable experience. I also had to address the fact that each character had their own ase. Iku’s ase came from the metaphysical world and Bisi’s from her physical beauty. The dynamics of their relationship with other characters and their position in relation to the world of *Eda* helped to inform me of their purpose and intentions. It was a challenge to distribute my attention between choreography and acting in the same production. In time, I was able to embrace the world of the characters

and not wonder, “Was everyone able to make it to their place in time? Is the spacing for the formation correct? Will we have time after the show to review the movement sequence?” When it came time for the performance, I had to give control over to the ensemble in regards to movements. I trusted them to move and breathe in the world of *Eda* and they performed wonderfully.

Eda allowed me to accept my own ase. Thanks to my family and upbringing I was aware of my personal ase and the ase of spiritual connection. I am still learning to fully accept the ase I receive from my community. Many loving hands have helped to nurture and form who I am today. I am eternally grateful for their guidance and examples. The research I gathered about the Yorùbá religion has grounded me in my endeavor to continue my growth as a well-rounded artist. I will continue my journey by using the arts to promote communal and global growth while being an active advocate for positive change in the world.

ADAPTING TO CHANGE WITHIN THE WORLD OF EDA

The word “challenge” usually has a negative connotation attached to it. It is something that requires force, something that is unwanted. I view challenges as agents of change, necessary obstacles to promote growth. With that being said, there were many challenges and opportunities that presented themselves when it came to choreographing Eda.

As an ensemble we had varying levels of coordination and skill. During the first couple of dance calls, I had a chance to see where we were as a group by doing various series of movement “down the line.” I was rather pleased with the ensemble’s learning ability and willingness to get out of their comfort zone. Darren Harbour, who played Thin Cousin, is a legally blind performing artist, and to make the rehearsal process as efficient as possible I made it my goal to be very clear about the quality and speed of each movement. Harbour came to the ensemble with a good deal of dance/movement experience and methods of determining the movement asked of him. We quickly developed a system of collaboration. I would first describe the movement verbally, and he would put my description to physical action. I would then either guide his body to the movement, or let him feel the movement as I did it. I was inspired by his skill and adaptability. Our process of working together to learn the dances aided the rest of our ensemble in learning, as well. I may have been the choreographer of the piece, but Darren was one of my teachers.

Unbeknownst to our cast members at the time, our Eda, Takayla Williams, was expecting. Takayla decided early on in the rehearsal process to tell Nefertiti Burton and myself that she was a mother to be. After she shared the exciting news, it was up to me to take the new information into account when considering group and individual choreography. I made it a part of my mission to give movement that was dynamic and at the same time respectful of Takayla's body and child to be. Takayla did not wish to make the official announcement to the cast yet, so I had to contain my enthusiasm when reshaping some of the movement pieces.

Eda was the first theatrical production in which I totally obstructed my hair to portray a character. For all other productions I have been a part of, I have always styled my locs to fit the designer's needs, but they have always been visible in some way. The style of hair I call locs is commonly described as dreadlocks. I do not use the name dreadlocks because I found nothing dreadful about them. Obscuring them for the character of Bisi gave her a distinctive difference from Iku, which proved to be very effective. I am thankful to the designer, Zhanna Goldentul, for making that possible. For Iku I was able to use my hair to add a powerful, otherworldly essence to the mask. My locs also helped to obscure the straps that attached the mask to my face.

Not only was *Eda* the last main stage show I performed in at UofL, but it was also the last theatrical production in which I had locs. For many, cutting or trimming one's hair is a part of monthly or weekly routine and not something to warrant mention in an academic document, but for this instance I believe it is a story worth telling. I had my locs since the age of five. They were a staple to my appearance and my being. A number of my family members and close friends had only known me with this "permanent" style. My family members had or have locs for religious and spiritual reasons. My initial

reasoning for wanting the hairstyle was one of convenience. I was an extremely tender headed youth, and I quickly noticed that if one had locs, one didn't have to endure combing or constant styling. After assessing the situation I made a request of my parents to loc my hair. After some time debating and patiently waiting, my request was granted.

I was elated when my mother, Theresa Davis, adorned my head in a style that I would maintain until the age of 25. At their longest length they reached down my back to rest just below my hips. Over the years I would trim them from time to time so that I could maneuver in an effective manner. I originally acquired locs as a means to spare my head from the dreaded comb, but having them took me on an unexpected spiritual journey. My locs were a comfort to me, a constant reminder of where I had been and where I would be going. They grounded me in my walk, my talk and my daily living. They taught me patience and gave me a sense of pride and joy.

My decision to remove my locs was not an easy one. I thought about it long and hard and made the decision for myself. Not based on the opinions of others, but solely based on my need for change. My answer when asked why I did it is simply, "it was time." I had my reasons and I made the choice knowing full well the consequences. I cannot say that I do not have moments of regret, but I will say that my perspective has changed for the better. It has been interesting to see how my change in appearance has impacted the people around me. From time to time I have phantom locs brush my back and face, but it is happening less often now. I had freedom with my locs and now I have a different type of freedom. I have started another journey and I am doing so knowing that even bigger changes may lie ahead. I embrace that fact and give thanks for all that I had, all that I have and all that I will gain.

I would be remiss if I did not mention the tenacious spirit of one of our assistant stage managers, Charity Means. Means stepped in for a fellow ensemble member who was unable to continue midway through one of the final nights of our production. I was not able to fully admire her willingness to engage change until after the night's performance was over because I was in the midst of a quick change. I am grateful for her energy and willingness to jump in and give of herself for the production. Means was brave and prepared to engage uncertainty.

I am thankful to each and every person who had a hand in making *Eda* come to life. If you planned, designed, plotted, labored in the shop, sewed/washed/purchased any garments, helped patrons find their seats, designed programs, sold tickets, hung lights, swept floors, called cues, moved set pieces, or knocked politely on dressing room doors to shout “5 till places,” I would like to say thank you. Your efforts and energy were not in vain. I must say a special thanks to Director Nefertiti Burton. Without her guidance and welcoming spirit, it is very likely I would have not come to the University of Louisville. Burton entrusted me to lead and go beyond myself. Burton provided a positive environment for us to grow as an ensemble and as individuals. ę se.

ONWARD AND FORWARD

“Whatever the level of his training, an actor must continue to sharpen his consciousness of both voice and body.” - Tadashi Suzuki *The Way of Acting*

Artistic Endeavors

This summer I have the great opportunity to join Kentucky Shakespeare, in a collaboration with the Greek Festival, in the production of *The Birds* by Aristophanes directed by Greg Maupin. It will be great to work with Kentucky Shakespeare again and bring the performance to the people of Louisville. In July of this year, I am preparing to join the Cincinnati Shakespeare Company in Ohio. I had the opportunity to audition for the company early this semester, and was elated when I was offered a company position. I'm looking forward to working in a new city with a company such as Cincinnati Shakespeare. I cannot wait to further expanding my knowledge as an artist and develop new relationships with my new ensemble.

In order to continue with short film and photography I have begun writing a series of poetry and movement inspired shorts that I hope to film and edit this coming summer. I want to continue to explore the world of film and learn the skills needed to create and produce various project from start to finish. Being an actress, I know that film will play a role in my career, and I need to know how to work behind the camera as well as in front of it. Working with Aukram Burton, Professor Crites, Professor Hill and Ian Issitt has

greatly influenced my desire to further explore the complicated realms of film and photography.

After *Eda* came to a close, Dr. Vandenbroucke approached me with a request to assist with transitional movement for the production of *Freedom Days* by Steve Friedman. It was my first UofL production in which I took on the role of choreographer without the additional responsibilities of being an actor. I helped to facilitate transitions that would emphasize the stories of the play and ensure that actors were able to engage with the audience as they travelled. I enjoyed my short time with the cast and crew of *Freedom Days*. I was grateful for their acceptance, and glad to have had the opportunity to create with them. I look forward to choreographing future productions, and plan to continue to take classes in movement and dance in order to remain engaged in my field of interest and work.

Conclusion

My work in the production of *Eda* was a fulfilling and growing experience. I had the opportunity to once again get out of my comfort zone and confront uncertainty. I was able to utilize the teaching of my instructors from the University of Louisville and other institutions/environments of artistic education to advocate and facilitate change. I look forward to applying these practices and lessons to my pursuit of becoming a well-rounded artist.

In my opinion, to become a well-rounded artist, one must acquire the skills to adjust to the situations, circumstances and/or challenges at hand. In the theatre the phrase “take the note” is primarily used to state how an actor should acknowledge the

director(s)'s changes or desires in relation to the production. In short, a well-rounded artist must "take the note" on life and adjust accordingly. A well-rounded artist must also know when to take center stage and when to support the work of the ensemble for the better of the production/work at hand. There is a certain confidence and humility that pushes a well-rounded artist to new heights. A well-rounded artist is a team player who continually develops their strengths and promotes the growth of others.

I am still on my journey to becoming a well-rounded artist. I do not think that my journey will have an end point. It is a lifelong goal that I can always improve on.

However, it is not discouraging to know that this goal will always be out of my reach. A well-rounded artist is not stagnant; they are forever growing, expanding their knowledge, taking in the world and perfecting their craft. Along with that desire to expand and grow as an individual, I believe it is also imperative that one helps to promote the growth of others through outreach on a personal, communal and international level.

Every life, every human, every artist has their own journey. Each day is a blessing within itself. In this life I believe it is important to acknowledge, accept, advocate for and be led by change. Life is unpredictable in nature, and in order to engage fully in the gift that is life, one must accept and adapt to change. It is my wish that you have a memorable journey. Be the change you want to see in action and in truth. Be you. Be true. Indeed.

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EDUCATION

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2012-15

Circle In The Square Summer Intensive
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AWARDS & RECOGNITION:

Warren Oates Merit Scholarship Award
University of Louisville
2015

Student Spotlight- March
University of Louisville
2015

Appreciation Award for AmeriCorps Service Work
Berea Community High School
2012

Dr. Carter G. Woodson Academic and Interracial Education Award
Berea College
2008

TEACHING EXPERIENCE:

Instructor, Acting for Non-Majors
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Spring 2014-Fall 2014

Graduate Teaching Assistant, Enjoyment of Theatre Recitations
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Fall 2012-Spring 2013

Educational Clinic Teacher
Whitney M. Young Scholars Program
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Teaching Artist
Hip Hop Shakespeare Residency
Kentucky Shakespeare Company
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ADMINISTRATIVE EXPERIENCE:

Program Assistant
AileyCamp Atlanta
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Manager
University of Louisville Repertory Company
University of Louisville
Fall 2014- Spring 2015

Assistant Stage Manager
Gem of the Ocean by August Wilson, Directed by Clinton Turner Davis
University of Louisville
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PERFORMANCE EXPERIENCE- Selected Credits:

A Midsummer Night's Dream	Titania	Kentucky Shakespeare
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Hamlet	Player Queen	Kentucky Shakespeare
The Tempest	Miranda/Trinculo	Stage One/Co Pro UofL
Sleep Rock Thy Brain	Sue/Carol	ATL/Co Pro UofL
EDA	Iku/Harlot	University of Louisville
The Tempest	Juno	University of Louisville
Dead Man Walking	Marybeth Percy	University of Louisville
Monsieur Baptiste, The Con Man	Saraphina	University of Louisville
Shakin' the Mess Outta Misery	Miss Lamama	University of Louisville
The Death of the Last Black Man	Black Woman	Berea College