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# Pregnancy and performance : rights to the unveiling.

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PREGNANCY AND PERFORMANCE: RIGHTS TO THE UNVEILING

By

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B.A., Clark Atlanta University, 2011

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

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Department of Theatre Arts  
University of Louisville  
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December 2015

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A Thesis Approved on

December 3, 2015

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Nefertiti Burton

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## DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to JESUS CHRIST without whom none of this would be possible.

My grandmother Lessie Mae Williams, who encouraged me to always be better than my circumstance, she was truly the *epitome* of a GOD fearing, loving woman, (may you rest  
in peace)

and

My beautiful daughter Makayla Mae Jackson. Without whom I could not have experienced pregnancy and performing. I did not know it then but I know it now, you are my biggest blessing and greatest achievement. Without you I do not know where I would be. You are such an inspiration and because of you, I'll continue to chase my dreams. I

love you ladybug.

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Matthew Jackson, my husband and best friend, thank you for always encouraging me, praying for me and loving me unconditionally. When I'm down, you pick me up, and I am so grateful to be your wife. My mother, Lori Williams, you are the *epitome* of what a woman is, you've supported me continuously, and your faith in me is unwavering. I am truly blessed to have you as my mother, thank you for your love and support. My father, Jerry Manning Sr, I love you. Finally, thank you to those who have been essential to my development as an artist as well as those who have been supportive throughout my pregnancy. Most importantly I would like to thank the following people who dedicated themselves to my success by never allowing me to throw in the towel even when things got hard. I love you always and forever, Nefertiti Burton and Tia Davis.

## ABSTRACT

### PREGNANCY AND PERFORMANCE: RIGHTS TO THE UNVEILING

Takayla Justina Williams

August 7, 2015

Imagine you are an actress auditioning for a role, and the director asks, “If cast”, would you have conflicts?” You know you’re pregnant, but the director does not. You are also aware of the theatre’s production calendar; the production will be over before you start showing, or a couple of months before your due date. What do you do? Should you reveal the pregnancy, even though you know there is a possibility you may be discriminated against? Or do you hide it? What are the benefits and risks involved when the pregnant performer decides to conceal her pregnancy?

This thesis serves to answer those questions, explore the internal thoughts of the pregnant artist, establish her responsibility, and defend her right to continue to perform while pregnant. I will argue that the expectant mother reserves the right to unveil her pregnancy to the necessary persons’ if she so chooses and to determine when that reveal will happen, so that she is able to creative freely and without restrictions.



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## INTRODUCTION

Many believe we are born with a purpose; some believe in reincarnation, others in a higher power and some hold fast to scientific reasoning. Regardless of one's belief one thing remains constant: the stages of evolution within the body. Nowadays we refer to one of these stages as puberty; for the woman, *her* body may be the vessel through which life will come forth. Women are essential for reproduction and, although some women may not be able to have children because of medical reasons, for those who are it may or may not be a welcomed opportunity.

In today's society, many people reject motherhood for various reasons: income restrictions, marital status, career opportunities, or maybe fear of the unknown, among others. Maternity and what that represents may cause some to steer clear of this life-changing event; however, for numerous other women the opportunity to bring life into this world is a rewarding experience. A child is *supposed* to represent happiness and new beginnings; yet for many, having children is a hindrance and an inconvenience, especially as it pertains to the workplace. The Pregnancy Discrimination Act of 1978 under Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibits sex discrimination on the basis of pregnancy. Nevertheless, some women fear the risks of being rejected or overlooked should they discuss their pregnancies with employers.

Within this thesis, I will discuss fears of pregnant performers in theatre and argue that pregnancy is a private matter and that the pregnant performer has the right to determine whom she tells about her condition and when that information is to be shared based on my experiences in my thesis performance of *Eda*.

## 1st TRIMESTER

*To be pregnant is to be vitally alive, thoroughly woman, and distressingly inhabited. Soul and spirit are stretched - along with body - making pregnancy a time of transition, growth, and profound beginnings.*

*~Anne Christian Buchanan and Debra K. Kingsporn, *The Quicken Heart: A Journal for Expectant Mothers**

### *Fear of Disappointing*

Throughout our lives, each human being goes through transitional periods that help mold us into the people we are today. The pregnant woman's body goes through a similar transformation before it is ready to give birth.

Since I can remember, I've always been the "sensitive, people-pleasing" child who sought acceptance from everyone. It began with my parents; I was determined to please them so they would be proud of me. Pleasing them included excelling in school, doing chores, participating in school activities, and most importantly not having sexual relations. At a young age, my parents placed the crown of "responsibility" on my head and even in my adult years I would find myself carrying this weight along with me.

The thought of getting pregnant before I started my career was terrifying. From an early age, my parents stressed the importance of education. Neither one of them completed high school because they had us at extremely young ages. My parents instilled in me that school was important and getting a career came next. Children, however, could

wait. I remember countless nights discussing education with my dad. He would say “You have to make it out of this neighborhood. If you cannot do it, no one can.” It felt as if everyone depended on me. He would end such talks with “I am proud of you.” “Keep up the good work and stay focused.” When it came to his daughters, my dad was strict.

To ensure that we would stay the course he told us we could not date until we were in our twenties, and I could not help but honor my father’s wishes. I did not want a boyfriend out of fear of getting pregnant; I did not want to disappoint my parents. I decided to attend college because my parents insisted, after all, it was my responsibility to please them. I attend an HBCU (Historically Black College or University) in order to fulfill my father’s dream; which, inadvertently fulfilled my mother’s dream of traveling outside of my hometown, West Palm Beach, Florida. They were extremely proud of me, I even found them bragging to people about my achievements. I was finally being accepted for my accomplishments. However, I feared failing them.

My thoughts upon entering undergraduate was the same, however, my life was different. I was not that innocent little girl anymore, I had become a woman sooner than I had hoped. I was fresh out of a relationship and determined to succeed at college life. I had no mentors and there was no one who could give me guidance as to what to expect in college. I was literally “Fresh fish.” I stayed to myself a lot, keeping my head down, and doing what was asked of me. Eventually, I found my husband and the rest as they say, is history, until I became pregnant.

Pregnancy was the one thing my parents wanted me to avoid until I became established, yet at the beginning of my third year of my training, I would find myself carrying the weight of the world on my shoulders, struggling with issues of trust,

acceptance of my pregnancy and evolving into a man for my thesis project. I was disappointed in myself because I felt I was letting my parents down, as well as my professors. My goal was not to inform anyone of my pregnancy, until I was about eight months, but as classes set in and auditions were underway, worry and doubt started to loom over my head and I found myself asking that age old question, “Can I really have it all?”

### *Undergraduate Training*

*Any human anywhere will blossom in a hundred unexpected talents and capacities simply by being given the opportunity to do so.*

*-Doris Lessing*

Initially, I attended Florida Memorial University, which held the Lou Rawls Theatre for Performing Arts. I was excited to be able to study theatre. The theatre was newly built and had dressing rooms for the actors; however they did not offer theatre as a major or minor, and thus I transferred to Clark Atlanta University (CAU). CAU was an entirely different HBCU then Florida Memorial, it felt as though students were there for the party life rather than academia. When it came to the Theatre department, there were no dressing rooms - let alone a theatre building. The performances took place in Haven Warren Auditorium, which was not exclusive to the theatre students. There was no costume or stagecraft shop at the University. We studied stagecraft at Georgia State University, where it was taught, and costumes were pulled from our personal closets unless they were period pieces. The parallel between the two was surprising; one offered no theatre major yet had a theatre, and the other had no theatre but offered a major. It did not matter to me, though, because either way, I would find solace in the theatre.

CAU's theatre objective was to offer the student an overview of theatre, touching on everything from theatre history to production skills. Students receive training in African American Theatre as well. Some major courses included: Stage Craft, Stage Management, Directing, Acting, Dramaturgy, Theatre History, Costume History, and Speech Communication, to name a few.

The performance aspect of my training was almost non-existent at CAU because I took Acting courses at Florida Memorial, and the theatre department was in the midst of a transitional period when I arrived. I only took two acting classes at CAU: an Acting II course and a course for Acting for Television, Film and Radio. I never inquired as to whether or not I could reenroll in an introductory level acting class; and with my lack of knowledge in regards to college, I did not know I could ask for that option. I did not have an understanding of acting techniques or how to apply them on stage. CAU offered me the opportunity to examine plays critically and afforded me the opportunity to explore different networks of theatre, but as an actor I felt undeveloped and desired more training.

#### *Acceptance into Graduate School*

I decided to audition for graduate school a year after I graduated from CAU. While searching for graduate programs, I came to the University of Louisville's Theatre Arts Department and noted the African American Theatre Program. A few weeks after auditioning I received my acceptance letter from the University. I was awarded a graduate teaching assistantship at the University, which meant I would receive a full tuition waiver and a monthly stipend to teach, all while perfecting my craft.



In addition to being committed to their studies in the program, the assistantship required students to teach up to three undergraduate courses a semester and fulfill a duty assigned by the department. Graduate students also had the opportunity to pursue the department's Graduate Certificate in African American Theatre.

The African American Theatre Program (AATP) is the only program of its kind in the nation. The Graduate Certificate requires students to complete several African American Theatre courses including history, theory, literature and performance. Students have the option of taking relevant courses in Pan African Studies, English, History, and other departments that relate to the African American experience. In this way, students can expand their knowledge and apply their skills to other areas.

Students accepted into the MFA program in Performance receive extensive training in voice, movement, theory, and acting. Students are required to complete classes as well as perform in six main stage productions or student-produced studio theatre under a guest director. Being a part of this rigorous program means many 14-20 hour work days for the average graduate student, by the 3<sup>rd</sup> year of training students will complete a thesis role and submit a thesis paper before graduation. Being a part of this program requires resilience, flexibility, talent, and humility and I was ready; besides I had no prior commitments, so staying committed to the program was not going to be a problem.

During the program, students will take six semesters of Voice during which they are developing various skills. One of these many skills are dialects, students explore many regional dialects including but not limited to, Received Pronunciation British, Cockney, "Nigerian" and Trinidadian to name a few. This work is also accompanied by

utilizing the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA). Within the class, we employed books such as *The Joy of Phonetics* and *Accents* by Louis Colaianni and *Bringing Speech to Life* by Claudia Anderson. IPA also assists a great deal with understanding how to enunciate words correctly from different regions, while Linklater's ability to help actors reach specific resonators allows them to access various vocal channels.

Of all the courses offered I looked forward to Voice. Prior to graduate school I had received no voice training. I was introduced to the Linklater method under the guidance of Dr. Rinda Frye utilizing the book *Freeing The Natural Voice* by Kristen Linklater. Within this process, students identify and release tension located in various parts of the body. They also learn to receive and sustain breath as well as lengthen the spine properly. Linklater states, "The voice communicates the inner world of the psyche to the outer world of attentive listeners both on the stage and in life". (Linklater 8)

During my 2nd year of MFA study, I chose to perform a regional African dialect focusing on Nigeria. On the website Ideal Dialect, it was referred to as "Nigerian"; however, this is incorrect. "Nigerian" is not a language, but rather a systematic way to categorize speech patterns of the people of within this region. By using the term "Nigerian," we ignore that fact that there are more than two hundred ethnic groups in Nigeria, each with their own language. Keeping this in mind, I listened to many of the recordings, toggling between male and female voices to obtain a clear understanding of rhythm and vocal placement; but I also sought recordings elsewhere. These would become essential for the role I performed in my thesis show.

## 2<sup>nd</sup> TRIMESTER

*It's an established fact. Some women can't stand being pregnant, getting big and bloated, and hauling around a giant stomach, and some women, for reasons, probably understood by Darwin, love it.*

– Rich Cohen

### *The Pregnant Woman's Plight*

Women experience pregnancies every day, but how many people think about what that woman is going through both physically and emotionally? Until one has experienced carrying a child, one cannot understand a pregnant woman's plight.

A lot of pregnant women are often poked and prodded by their doctors, stared at, and/or touched on their baby bumps- without giving permission. Pregnancies for some are glamorous; however, for countless other women it can cause much chaos and uncertainty. Chaos ensues when the woman becomes restricted in her daily life. Pregnancy can affect how she is viewed, specifically in the workplace.

There are laws prohibiting discrimination in the workplace; as a matter of fact there is an entire government website dedicated to informing people of their rights and pregnancy is listed on the site as well (Commission). The US Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) describes pregnancy discrimination as, "... treating a woman applicant or employee unfavorably because of pregnancy, childbirth, or a medical condition related to pregnancy or childbirth," which means that employers who

discriminate against a woman because of her pregnancy can be sued. The EECO also says that if the woman is temporarily unable to perform her job for any medical conditions related to the pregnancy or childbirth, then the employer must treat her in the same manner that any other temporarily disabled employee is treated.

It is no wonder that many companies stray away from the pool of expectant mothers (even though it is illegal); being pregnant in the government's eyes is seen as a "temporary" disability and according to many workplaces, persons' with a disability are a liability. The government and employers, however, are not the only group of individuals who see pregnancies as disabilities. People closest to the expectant mother can also place restrictions on her. Jill Krementz, writes in *How it Feels to Live with a Physical Disability*, writes,

We use a number of terms to describe those whose bodies are not perfectly formed: congenitally defective, physically impaired handicapped, disadvantaged, disabled. I don't really like any of them because they imply negative attributes, something that is lacking or cannot be done. (p 11)

Knowingly or unknowingly, family members and friends can play a huge part in making the expectant mother feel incapable of success. When someone continually harasses her over trivial things such as carrying groceries, picking up a stool or how she proceeds to walk upstairs, that can become mind-boggling to the mother. When has carrying a loaf of bread been dangerous? Restricting her from carrying groceries because you are afraid she will harm the baby puts this small box around her. It can also become insulting and demeaning because the freedom she once had is now gone. That family member or friend has now made the mother a child. A better way of assisting may be to ask if she needs help. This assisted me a great deal. It helped to assure me that assistance

was there if I desired it, instead of feeling helpless. I was well aware of my circumstance(s) and I did not wish to be reminded of it, so when people made me feel as if I could not do things, I would shut down. Asking is always polite, and neither the expectant mother nor family member should assume anything.

Aside from having to fight for the right to work, the pregnant woman is given particular guidelines from her doctor to help protect her and her unborn child during the nine-month period. These guidelines add additional stress to the expectant mother. She is expected to maintain a healthy weight, find time to rest, and stay hydrated more than the average person. If she does not, she risks the chances of complications during her pregnancy or in delivery.

“I have not felt the baby kick all day,” is one of the concerns of pregnant performers- the nagging, worrying feeling that you get when you do not feel movement from your child. Feeling the child kick is something that many women look forward to because it tells them that their child is alive and well.

I found myself questioning the health of my unborn baby numerous times because of my responsibilities and activities, and of course, because it was my first pregnancy. I still couldn't comprehend how it happened or why for that matter; but here I was attempting to understand the situation and help others to understand it as well.

Throughout pregnancy, the actor may suffer from fatigue, dehydration, stress or a collection of these things. Pregnancy consumes an extensive amount of energy and attempting to rest can prove to be a difficult task for the expectant performer. Rehearsals can be a strenuous process for everyone, especially the pregnant actor, because this is the

time that they can create freely and explore different character viewpoints. The actor is exploring the many qualities that make up their character(s) while adjusting to a new ensemble as well.

As mentioned before, fatigue is a common effect for the expectant mother, especially around the first trimester. Reason number one is because the mother's body is now the baby's life support; number two, her hormone levels have increased causing the body to produce more blood, burn more energy that causes her sugar to drop while absorbing more nutrients and water (Murkoff Mazel 128). To fight fatigue, the actor should maintain snacks such as peanut butter and crackers (for protein), fruits, veggie snacks, and water so that she is always replenishing herself. An expectant mother should be aware that there is a strong possibility that they can become fatigued before, during and after rehearsals. She should always make sure that she is taking necessary precautions to stay hydrated and keep snacks with her throughout rehearsal. If she has notified the stage manager or director about her pregnancy, then she can collaborate with them to develop some signals to inform them that she needs a break.

As part of my thesis research I conducted an interview with a pregnant performer who wishes to remain nameless (I will refer to her as Mackenzie Jackson). She stated that fatigue was a huge obstacle for her; however it did not prevent her from performing her job successfully (Mackenzie Jackson, personal communication July 16, 2015). Mackenzie also suffered from morning sickness that could be tied to her fatigue, as stated in the book, *What to Expect* (Murkoff and Mazel).

Mackenzie stated that she told few people about her pregnancy, and she also revealed that she had had a miscarriage once before. Those aware of her pregnancy also knew about the miscarriage and, would panic every time she moved or picked up items. For example, the costume designer (who is also her friend) was concerned about her wearing high heels in the show. “I told her it was fine, but she insisted. I laughed because I guess I didn’t see it as a big deal.” Mackenzie said she believes there are a lot of “natural misconceptions” as it pertains to miscarriages. She said picking up something heavy, wearing heels, or eating the wrong thing “doesn’t actually harm the baby,” it’s the things that happen within your body that causes the miscarriages. “I mean, I’m not a doctor, but from my understanding, my knowledge, and my experience it’s from the things that you can’t control.”

I agreed with Mackenzie’s sentiments: people are not aware of what you are going through emotionally unless they are informed. I was not as accepting and welcoming as Mackenzie was. As mentioned previously, I was distraught. Many people believe that women are overjoyed when they find out that they are expecting, but that is not true. In the book *The Twenty-first-Century Motherhood*, author Ivana Brown’s article entitled “Ambivalence of Motherhood Experience” says it all, “Being a mother is conventionally associated with happiness. For many mothers, however, mothering is filled with conflict, anxiety, and ambivalence. Yet maternal ambivalence often remains unacknowledged” (Brown et al 121). Brown says, “In general, ambivalence refers to the coexistence of conflicting and opposing thoughts or feelings; in the case of the mothers, these are usually described as a coexistence between love and hatred” (Brown 122). So even though a part of me wanted to acknowledge my pregnancy and embrace it, the other

part of me hated what was possibly interfering with my education and was not up to the “congratulatory” chants.

A co-performer and friend of mine, Jody Henry, was also pregnant during her thesis performance. Ms. Henry portrayed the role of Madame in *M. Baptiste the Con Man*. I was also a member of the cast in this production and I never knew she was pregnant during rehearsals and performances. When I conducted the interview I inquired about her reasons for concealing the pregnancy. She said, “I was going through a lot. My mother was in the hospital, and I already had people always asking me if I was okay. I didn’t want the added stress. Not to mention I was afraid of disappointing particular people” (Jody-Ann Henry, personal communication July 17, 2015).

I was surprised to learn she was pregnant during her thesis production, especially considering the restrictive period costuming she was required to wear and some of the stunts she had to perform in the show. One stunt in the play required her to be picked up and placed stomach down on the shoulders of Baptiste, the antagonist. I asked her about this moment, “I was not as worried about being on his shoulders because I could push myself up, I was more concerned about the corset.” She was referring to her costume piece. Throughout rehearsals and performances, the women were made to wear corsets, which would be worn tightly, squeezing the abdominals and pushing up the breasts. There were times that I helped her put on her corsets and she would tell me to continue pulling until she said stop.

After speaking with her, I quickly realized that I was like everyone else when it came to being concerned about a pregnant friend, employee, family member or spouse. I



believe that had I known she was pregnant throughout rehearsals and performances, I would have approached her every night to see if she was okay. I would have also reframed from tying her corset as tightly as I did. I would have been the overly worried friend who prevented her from doing her work, which would have caused me to internally dissect everything she did in rehearsals, affecting both of our performances.

I commended Ms. Henry on her bravery. She understood then what I understand now, and that is, people who care about you will always worry about you, especially if you are pregnant.

In both of these instances, I could relate. I preferred no restrictions placed on me and I did not wish to disappoint anyone; yet, the only one I disappointed was myself. I had to accept my fate; I was pregnant, and this baby was going to come whether I liked it or not. It was my job to prepare for her just like the character Everyman had to prepare for his fate. He needed to accept the fact that he was going to die, and no one was going to go with him; he was to face Olodumare alone. Both of us needed to own up to our responsibilities and understand that the circle of life is inevitable, and if you go up against God, you will lose. Once I accepted the fact that I was pregnant, I was able to trust certain faculty enough to know that they would assist me in any way they could. I appreciated that, but it was up to me to make the decision to announce my pregnancy to anyone else if I so desired. The ball was in my court, and I reserved the right to confide in whomever I wanted whenever I was ready.

*Choosing Eda: Thesis Performance*

During the first semester of my 2<sup>nd</sup> year in the graduate studies program, I found myself on probation. According to my evaluation, my performances in class and onstage did not reflect the work of a 2<sup>nd</sup>-year graduate student. Some of the faculty felt I lacked connection to Grandmother Pascal, my performance role for that semester in *M. Baptiste, the Con Man*. During that semester, I voiced discontent about the roles that I was receiving. I did not feel that they offered a challenge for me, and they were not any different from characters I portrayed as an undergrad. Throughout my undergraduate training, I was continuously type-cast as the mother or grandmother, mainly the nurturing type. It was my hope that upon entering graduate school the roles would change; however, they didn't. I told a couple of professors my concerns about this particular role and the problems that I was having. I confided in those I thought I could trust, only for them to turn around and write about it in my assessment and use it against me. I also received notification that some faculty believed I needed to seek counseling, because they felt I was going through a depression. I felt frustrated because no one inquired about my well-being. I felt that if anyone was concerned about this, then I should've been approached; it should not have appeared in my evaluation.

I felt that I was being attacked and critiqued rather than my performance. I was hurt. I did not feel safe enough to talk to anyone about anything for fear that it would appear in my evaluations. I shut down on everyone; I did not want to speak about personal matters or my feelings. I decided that if there was anything bothering me, I would keep it to myself and would not allow anyone to use my weaknesses against me.

By the second semester, I decided that I was going to focus on being positive. I was going to walk down the halls with a smile on my face, volunteer for everything first,

and always say, “Yes.” I refused to complain about anything. That semester we also had a guest director named Clinton Turner Davis come to direct August Wilson’s *Gem of the Ocean*. I desperately wanted to work with him for many reasons, but primarily because he worked on Broadway as a director and stage manager, and he had absolutely no idea who I was. This meant I would not be judged based on past productions. I needed to be in this play to prove that I was a talented performer who deserved to be in the program. The only problem with auditioning was, I felt that the only role I would be considered for, would be the exact role that I was attempting to escape from.

Eventually, I put those feelings aside and landed the role of Aunt Ester, which would eventually become my “breakout” role. Aunt Ester presented many challenges. She had lengthy monologues that contained many parables. This caused me to really look at line-linking, inflections and the use of the “coloring” technique for my words. I also applied active verbs to many lines for the first time ever in my career. Portraying Aunt Ester was one of my “aha” moments, in the sense that I finally felt like an actor. I was not acting in one of my own plays, but rather in a professional play directed by someone who would allow me to figure out who this person was. I thoroughly enjoyed being chosen to perform this role, it heightened my awareness as an actor; however, it was the rehearsal process that stood out as truly exciting.

The rehearsal process for *Gem* was very liberating. Mr. Davis always told actors to follow their instincts. He was knowledgeable, considerate and determined to allow the actor to have his/her own process. When it came to memorization, he said we’d get that with time, his focus was on clarity and hearing the plosives at the ends of lines. Mr. Davis was especially particular about the rhythm of the play; he said the Akan drum was the

heartbeat, and by keeping the pace of the drum, we kept the play alive. The Akan drum is supposed to represent the three continents and the transportation of millions of slaves during the Atlantic Slave Trade. (Mbale) Throughout the rehearsal process, I was able to create freely, and for the first time in a long time I felt the character surging through my veins. I remembered what it felt like to act, and I was proud of my progress. After the production ended, I received my midterm evaluation, and the faculty seemed impressed with my performance both on and off stage. My professors felt I was performing like a “graduate” student in the classroom. I also felt I held the confidence of one. My professors were seeing improvements and I too saw a change in myself. It was time to search for a thesis role.

I was not entirely sure what a thesis role was, so when the time came to submit production ideas I was limited in my selection of plays. My advisor, Nefertiti Burton, suggested various plays, and she also voiced a couple that she was interested in directing. Although I did not have to be a part of her production necessarily, I wanted to be. Many students spoke about working with Professor Burton and her process. I needed to experience it. I required a haven to create, and I desired a director who would have me trust my instincts as Mr. Davis did.

We discussed three plays for a possible thesis production; *Ruined* and *Intimate Apparel*, both by Lynn Nottage, and *Eda* by Obotunde Ijimere. I was drawn to *Ruined* because of the nature of the play. *Ruined* is set in a Congolese brothel during a time of unrest. The play revolves around the lives of three women and their stories of how their bodies became ruined (Nottage, *Ruined*).

The role that I was primarily interested in was Mama Nadi, the brothel owner. She was a business woman, and above all else a survivor of her past circumstances. She uses those experiences to put herself ahead in life, even if it means using others to get what she wants. This play required actors to be vulnerable, an access point that was challenging for me, but not impossible.

*Intimate Apparel* centered on Ester, a seamstress who moved to New York to pursue her dream of owning a boutique. She falls for a Jew, who supplies her with her fabrics; however, because of his religious beliefs and conservative lifestyle, the two are not able to be together. Feeling the urge to love and be loved, Ester starts to pen back and forth with George, a man she has never met, who is working on the Panama Canal. The two eventually marry, and George turns out to be a scam artist, leaving Ester with a broken heart and no money. Through pure resilience, Ester starts over again. (Nottage, *Intimate Apparel*)

I was interested in performing the role of Ester. *Intimate Apparel* also offered an opportunity for Tia Davis and Travis Stolp, two other MFA candidates in their third year, to be a part of the production. I found similarities between Ester and myself: we were both caring, determined individuals who would stop our lives for the sake of others; we both struggled with our self-esteem and yearned for approval from someone we loved. I knew I could do this character justice, she would be a great role for me, just not one that would ultimately challenge me. For my thesis role, I needed a character that would challenge me both physically and emotionally. I wanted to embrace this character wholeheartedly and not be concerned about what others thought. This character needed to have the qualities of both Mama Nadi and Ester all while making me have to transform my

body. Movement was something that I definitely wanted to play with when working on my thesis character. Whoever the character was, I wanted to apply what I learned in my classes up to this point.

After reading *Eda*, I knew that this was the play. *Eda* (which means human) is a Yoruba adaptation of the medieval play *Everyman*. Everyman, who is the main character, is sought out by the personification of death, or Iku, in the Yoruba adaptation, by order of God, known as Olodumare by the Yoruba people in Nigeria. God is displeased with Everyman and thus has sent Death to prepare him for his home-going. Everyman begs for more time. When Death agrees, he begins his spiritual journey to find someone or something to follow him to heaven and speak on his behalf before God. Unfortunately, he finds that no one will assist him in his travels except his weak and starving Good Deeds. Eventually, Everyman repents and is granted forgiveness.

I read *Everyman* while a student at CAU and had fallen in love with the play because of its moral message and the spiritual journey that Everyman had to embark upon. I too was on a spiritual journey. During my studies in Atlanta I started attending church regularly and even got baptized. I was not miserable at CAU anymore, I was becoming established. I felt that my life was turning around when suddenly, I was told my loans did not cover my living expenses. I was discouraged, but my dad and stepmom offered me the opportunity to come stay with them for free; they'd even let me use my dad's car to go to and from school. Things were looking up. But one day, after living there for about two weeks, they told me my stepmom was going to jail for embezzlement. I immediately rewound back to the living situation with them when I was in middle

school; I had been in this same position but younger. After that experience, I told myself I would never get placed in this predicament again, but here I was blindsided.

The stipulations surrounding my living arrangement had changed as well; I was to become my sisters' "nanny." I could not understand how the Lord had allowed me to end up in this position, *again*. I thought that by doing what the Lord had required of me, I would be rewarded, but instead I felt like I was suffering, so I started to act out. I started clubbing and coming home at all hours of the night, and I stopped going to church. My school life was suffering, I resented my sisters and took much of my frustrations out on them, and my personal life with my fiancée was almost ending. I was in the midst of spiritual warfare, and the evil side was winning.

I did not understand why good should have to suffer, but evil did not. It made no sense to me. After a while, I did not recognize myself in the mirror, it was time for me to straighten up and I felt Everyman was the same way. I did not believe that he woke up one day and decided to become this self-absorbed individual. His purpose was to do good, but after being poverty-stricken for so long, he allowed money to control him.

I had hoped that CAU would produce this play and allow me to perform as Everyman; however, the opportunity never presented itself. Naturally when the opportunity arose to play this character at the University of Louisville, I was thrilled. Professor Burton and I traded ideas back and forth in regards to this production; however, she had no idea which of her three proposals the Department would approve. The theatre department finally announced its productions for 2014-15 academic year and *Eda* was selected to kick off the season.

There is no set process for the casting thesis roles; it all depends on the director. In the case of *Eda*, both Tia and I were interested in the production and Professor Burton had agreed to cast both of us. Professor Burton told us to write down which roles we wanted most. She said if we overlapped we would trade back and forth between roles to see which characters suited us best.

I wrote down that I was interested in every role but desired Everyman for two reasons: first, I had been wanting to perform this character since I was an undergrad; and second, Everyman was a male character. I had never had the chance to portray a man. I was a Christian woman from America's lower economic class and I would have to transform myself into an incredibly rich West African man who practiced an African traditional religion.

Embodying a man was going to be challenging enough. However, I also needed to explore what it meant to be unapologetic, like Everyman. I needed to know how to internalize this attitude. I also needed plenty of voice work with a "Nigerian" dialect in order to incorporate it into the play. In this way, I could continue to work on a dialect and become grounded in it. I also enjoyed the moral aspects of the play. Playing Everyman would allow me to explore greed and lust without inhibition. This role would be a perfect thesis project for me.

Tia and I both shared similar feelings regarding the play, and both wanted to be cast as Everyman. Professor Burton, Tia and I discussed *Tia* portraying Everyman because, throughout her three years, she had not had the opportunity to play a character with significant stage time. Professor Burton wanted to see more of her. I did not mind, at first. I agreed. I wanted to see more of Tia onstage as well, also I had just finished



wrapping up *Gem of the Ocean* as Aunt Ester who had a slew of monologues and if I obtained the role of Everyman, he too held many monologues. Professor Burton thought it would be a good idea to have me play as Olodumare (GOD), which would allow me to compare and contrast the position of GOD to that of Aunt Ester, who was seen as someone who washed souls. The idea of portraying GOD was welcomed and I enjoyed the idea of having more free time because GOD was only in one scene, however, the more that I thought about giving up the role of Everyman, a character I dreamed of portraying since undergraduate school, the more I felt that I was losing an opportunity.

Firstly, I could really transform myself and become a *man*, that in itself would be an amazing challenge, also I would be able to utilize my training; secondly, I would fulfill a dream that I had for a long time, which was to be Everyman and perform in this play. I contemplated about what it was that I wanted to do and what would challenge me the most, on one hand, supporting my friend was incredibly important to me, on the other hand, challenging myself and knowing that I was *good* enough to perform this role was equally, if not more important. I did not want to give up without trying, if the role was for me, then it was for me, but I wouldn't know unless I tried and the more that I thought about losing the opportunity to portray Everyman, the more I became determined to play him. This was my dream role, and although I wanted to see my best friend get up there and successfully perform, I could not help but feel a little envious. I did not want to give him up. I wanted her to be on stage for a lengthier time, but not at the expense of me. I could not let him go without a fight. I decided that when auditions came I was going to fight for him, and if Tia wanted it as badly as I did, she would fight too.

*Dying to Portray Everyman: Auditioning for Eda*

There were two rounds of auditions for *Eda*, one in the spring and again in the fall so everyone could participate. During the first set of auditions, I was extremely energetic. I found myself doing a lot of the readings with the actors when it came to Everyman. Everyman was present in almost every scene, and so he was required to read. When Tia's schedule freed, she and I would switch places. The flow of the dialogue combined with Everyman's ego was such an exhilarating combination. He was conceited and so sure that I found myself loving and hating him at the same time. Seeing how his presence was felt throughout, I was always working and reworking his character with every person that audition. I would change things to see if I could take on his persona.

Auditions took place in the spring semester from 7 to 10 with no breaks in between, this meant always working. The lights were on full blast. Depending on what scene we were working, I could find myself on the ground clenching my chest because of a heart attack, or begging someone to follow me to heaven. It was beautifully exhausting and hot, but I enjoyed every moment. When I was not reading for Everyman, I was Companion (his best friend), Olodumare, or any character that needed to be filled. I was excited to be a part of this production.

After auditions had commenced, Professor Burton, Tia and I discussed possible casts. Professor Burton said she would take all things into consideration and contact us during the summer and inform us of our roles. Early to Mid-June I found that I would be Everyman, and I was overjoyed. I wanted to start preparing, the first thing I started researching was his religious beliefs. I knew some things about the Yoruba belief system,

but I wanted to understand the deities and their roles in Everyman's life fully. I figure I could then compare and contrast both of our religious backgrounds and analyze this for my thesis. I could not wait until the second round of auditions.

When the 2<sup>nd</sup> set of auditions rolled around in the Fall, I was in my first trimester of pregnancy. I was tired and lacked energy at times, but I did not want anyone to notice. The director wanted to see the chemistry between myself and other actors, which meant, I was going to be on stage under the hot glaring lights, performing full out. I panicked. The first trimester of pregnancy establishes the beginning building of the baby, I feared that performing full out would harm the baby, I could not risk that. I contacted my doctor and after speaking with her, she said I would be okay but recommended I tell my director, just in case. I was terrified; I did not want to inform anyone about anything that was going on with me, especially my director because I did not want to be told I could not perform.

Eventually, fear got the best of me, and I confided in Tia who urged me to tell Professor Burton, but I was afraid of upsetting her. She entrusted me with this role, gave me exactly what I asked for and here I was pregnant. I did not want to disappoint her. I finally told her the second night after auditions concluded. I was relieved that she was not mad at me but rather was very supportive. She was happier than me, telling me to embrace the baby, and saying, "it is a gift." I voiced concerns about the callbacks, which were the following night and future rehearsals, and she said not to worry, she told me to take care of both myself and the baby and recommended I not go full out. She also suggested that I sit when I felt I needed to.

I found myself sitting out more during the second round of auditions and callbacks. I hated the feeling of not doing something. There were many times that I wanted to jump up and work a scene with someone because their energy was so amazing and I felt we could play off of one another, but I did not have the energy to do so. I felt helpless and annoyed, especially when it was a scene with Everyman. It did not matter that these were callbacks; I was still working on him, finding his quirks and figuring him out, so to see someone else step into his shoes, frustrated me a little. I felt that if I did not get it together, Professor Burton might replace me because I was not able to work. Therefore whenever I did get up to work scenes with others, I would push harder causing unnecessary strains on my body. I did not think it was “okay” for me to sit out even though my director told me it was. I found myself battling to win a role that was already mine. I needed to prove that my pregnancy was not going to be a hindrance for the director or ensemble.

### *Understanding Everyman: Character Analysis*

To understand why Everyman was the way that he is, I needed to know his past. I went into the process not wanting to force anything on the character but rather let the character come to me.

I needed to accept Everyman as an individual first and realize that although he is supposed to represent this idea of being “every man,” he was *one* man. I had to strip him of his “nickname” and give him a name that is native to his region. That was the tricky part because I was not familiar with the naming system within the Yoruba culture, so naturally I searched online for a list of Yoruba names. I did not want the first name that popped up on the

page, I wanted a name that focused on the fact that Olodumare (Olorun) sent Iku to Everyman for a reason and his name needed to be something powerful.

I came across the name Eniolurunda which means a person created/molded (especially) by God (Nairaland). Everyman is a symbolic play; he represents all men figuratively; so when I came across the name Eniolurunda, I knew that was his name. With this much love placed on Everyman's head, him falling into temptation would be all the more heartbreaking for his Creator. Eniolurunda's relationship with the Almighty is sacred; he makes sure to pray and thank Olodumare every day for allowing him to wake. Eniolurunda is attempting to be a man after Olodumare's own heart, and he does not care who knows it. He wears his love for Olodumare with pride.

Eniolurunda name also has the word "Olurun" which I found to closely resemble Olorun, which means GOD or Creator of the Universe. His name means "a part of GOD," which is embedded in the name and spirit of this man. During his early life, Eniolurunda loses people closest to him. His father left many years ago and his mother died due to fever, he had no one, but he was still a man after GOD's own heart. A carpenter by nature, he would fix neighbors home at little cost to them and sometimes extend his service for free. Whatever he could do to help maintain his people, he did, and he did so without complaining. After finding the love of his life, he marries her and shortly after she is with child. The family is happy because of their work done to honor Olorun.

One day Eniolurunda heads to the market only to return to screaming heard in the village. It is his wife. When he enters the house, he realizes that she has miscarried and is still bleeding. He frantically calls to the neighbors and ask them to help him search for

the doctor, but everyone is too busy. He asked someone to stay with his wife while he searches and again, they are too busy. He tells his wife he loves her and then proceeds to search for a doctor. When he finally reaches him he immediately asks for money; Eniolurunda says he has none but is superb with his hands, save his wife and he'll come work for free. The doctor laughs and says he has servants for that, kicking Eniolurunda out. Upon arriving home, he finds his wife's body cold. He mourns her. He asks Olodumare why her life could not be spared even after taking his child but receives no answer. This is the bitterness that he feels and it begins to consume him. He is no longer a man after Olodumare's heart; he will now be a man of remembrance, because with the death of his wife, his old self has died and his new prideful self is awakened.

Eniolurunda was physically active prior to becoming a wealthy man, because of his odd jobs; once he gained money, he let himself go. He was heavy physically and metaphorically, and to make sure people knew how rich he was, Eniolurunda made sure he is always carrying money and has an abundance of jewelry. He wears a signature ring on his pinky finger (which is the ring given to him, from his deceased wife). An animal related to him would be similar to that of an elephant, trampling over anything that gets in its way. His movement is light as if he is gliding on air, very arrogant and sure of himself. Like a peacock, constantly showing off his feathers but not realizing that people are only interested in the feathers, not the bird itself. Eniolurunda likes to listen to himself speak, he feels that he is the most important person in the world and because he has money, he does not have to obey the laws. The only time his voice changes is when he finds out that he is to die. He leads from his stomach; this is where the center of his life is. It is where he draws his power from and his go-to spot for comfort.

This character analysis would change during the rehearsal process as I continued to explore Everyman's person.

In rehearsal, Everyman's story did not change, however, my circumstances did. I found out I was expecting. This change in my body gave birth to Everyman's movement, voice, selfishness, vulnerability, bitterness, fears and eventually his redemption. His energy was now irradiating from the source that he hoped to return, an unborn child. Everyman prayed that he would be born again after receiving his message from Iku (Death). Within his religious beliefs, he could be born again *if* Olodumare forgave him of his current life. Everyman had forgotten his promises to Olodumare and thus became a selfish man and so Olodumare sought his life. Everyman's daughter was pregnant and at the end of the play, when he confesses his sins, Everyman is forgiven and reborn unto his daughter whose hope is to raise the child in a way that is pleasing onto Olodumare.

I found this to be extremely poetic. Here I was, pregnant and struggling with the idea that my child was a gift. I saw my pregnancy as an inconvenience. I fought with my religious views and sought answers from God as to why he would place a child within me just when I was reaching a new level in my graduate training. Everyman too was at the height of his life, things were amazing, he was wealthy, carefree, and on top of the world; then life made an abrupt change, he was to die, or in my case become pregnant. What good could possibly come from this? I was to give birth to this little person soon and that thought stayed with me as I was attempting to give birth to this character in another world. Like Everyman, I struggled with my selfish thoughts and yearned for forgiveness. If I was to embrace him, I needed to embrace pregnancy. I needed to answer my own questions while answering his. Everything was internal, just like with Everyman,

he struggled internally with himself, he hated the person he became but could not escape himself, and the only way to do that was to have a start fresh, be born again.

Same can be said about my pregnancy. In order to start new I had to seek forgiveness with God, my unborn child, and most importantly myself. Who cares what everyone else may have thought about me, I could not allow that to interfere with this beautiful person growing within my womb. I needed to understand that this was a new beginning for me, a new chapter inserted into a book that was still being written. This pregnancy happened for a reason and I was able to transport that reason into my character. I was able to really empathize; I wanted to save him from the “potsherds” (a place of no remembrance or forgiveness), what I in my beliefs consider “hell”.

Being able to sync both my situation to Everyman’s was an exhilarating feeling, every moment in rehearsal I felt my child move in some way. The energy from my belly literally gave me the chance to be able to breathe life into this character and give birth to Everyman.

### *Voicing and Embodying Eda*

When I learned that I was to portray Everyman, I knew instantaneously that I would struggle with maintaining the dialect, breath support and engaging my deeper vocal range. Everyman held multiple monologues that needed to resound throughout the space, the monologues also needed coloring, and so throughout rehearsal I continued to utilize Linklater’s method.

Everyman needed his voice, and I needed to access it past my current vocal range and breath support. However, I feared that I would not be able to capture his voice the



way I needed to because of my pregnancy. My voice can get squeaky and unnoticeable when I become self-conscious about my speech. I tend to clench my teeth and talk extremely fast; my breath intake was not the best either, it was short and very cut off. If I took a deep enough breath, the baby would stretch out, and one of its feet would enter my rib cage causing an excruciating pain to surge throughout my body. I needed to find a way to release tension as well as reach the deepest area of my vocal range without harming me or my child.

As I stated earlier, throughout our Voice classes, we utilized Linklater's book *Freeing the Natural Voice*, and rehearsals were no different for me. I turned to Linklater for help and also found similar support within Heidi Murkoff and Sharon Mazel's book, *What to Expect When You are Expecting*. Linklater focused on the spine and connection to a particular channel, while Murkoff and Mazel focused on releasing back pressure from the pregnancy. A similar exercise located in Linklater's book that can also be found in the pregnancy book is what Murkoff and Mazel call the "Dromedary Droop." (Murkoff Mazel 222)

The method requires the pregnant performer to get on all fours and breathe deeply. *What to Expect* tells the pregnant woman to relax her back and keep her neck lined with the spine, and then it tells her to arch her back while she allows her head to droop down slowly. Similarly, Linklater's method uses the same starting and ending positions using concrete terms while aiming for a particular focus. Each of these exercises assists the pregnant actor in obtaining a deeper breath while relaxing and releasing tension.

After finding the vocal exercises that I needed to help free my voice and access depth within my vocal channels, I shifted my focus to securing and maintaining my dialect. *Eda* is a Yoruba adaptation of the play *Everyman*, set in Nigeria. As mentioned before I worked with a “Nigerian” dialect and, therefore, had to access many resources, one of which was a dialect sheet that offered the correct way to pronounce words. When using a dialect, you must be clear, so people understand you. If I did not focus I would get what I refer to as “bubble gum mouth,” which is a fancy way of saying everything gets jumbled within my mouth.

As I continued to explore Everyman’s personality I kept referring to the scripture, “For what is a man profited if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his soul?” (King James Version). This was the question that was at the center of Everyman’s life for me as an actor. I began to focus on who this person was and started to peel back the layers. He possessed so many undesirable qualities that I could not wait to indulge in, qualities such as rudeness, overzealousness, conniving, and egotism; yet, he was not always this way.

To enter his psyche, I referred to Strasberg’s “Method Acting” which uses a number of steps in acting but the focus is, “relaxation, concentration and affective memory”. (Kraner 132-134). This method has the actor use her life experiences, senses, and emotions. I had to channel something in myself to find this character. There were many things that I needed to explore further aside from my desires; one of which was Everyman’s persona. Within my Movement class, during rehearsals for *Eda*, we were studying the Laban technique, which is a technique focused on the actor’s internal impulse to relate to a particular word. The idea is to take one of what Laban calls “The Eight Efforts” and apply it to the character without interference from the actor. To figure

out which of the Eight Efforts applied directly to Everyman's walk, I attempted to utilize them throughout rehearsals. "The Eight Efforts" are as follows, "Wring, Punch, Dab, Flick, Slash, Press, Glide, and Float" (The Theatrefolk Blog). As we pressed through the rehearsal process, I realized that Everyman uses all of these efforts at least once throughout the performance both physically and emotionally, however this method did not help with his presence onstage.

As I continued my work, I made sure to observe men (a note given to me by my director). She told me to watch the way that men walked and held themselves. Watching my fiancée helped tremendously and I also noticed his mannerisms and how they differed in comparison to my own. The real "ah-ha" moment arose when I was speaking to my dad on the phone: I said "Love you too, Papa *Bear*." I had not noticed it before, but my dad reminded me of a big bear. Heavy on his feet when he was tired, big and burly, graceful at times, and his voice and laugh was so hearty. His walk, very deliberate and powerful, and he was shielded from the world, only allowing you to know his secrets when he wanted you to know them. Upon this realization, I immediately made the physical comparison between Everyman and my dad. I was reminded of a past exercise. It was an animal exercise that we utilized within my Movement and acting class to explore archetypes. As I applied this training to my work and kept my dad in mind, the pieces came together. I was starting to embody Everyman, I had his voice and body, but no access to his mind. I was in my own head too much at times worrying about my unborn child and questioning what my director thought about me. I also wondered if I was showing and if so, who could tell.

I felt that I was becoming heavier. There were times when I felt sluggish and just wanted to sit out. I also found that I was a little clumsier than usual. I was so desperate to knock this performance out the park. I was determined not to allow anyone to say I could not act because I was pregnant, I was determined to graduate but feared I would not. This kept me from fully allowing Everyman to enter into my mind because my thoughts at times were not on him, they were on me and I became selfish.

### *Preeclampsia and Rehearsals*

With my pregnancy, I faced many challenges due to my weight. One of these was the diagnosis of preeclampsia. Preeclampsia is described as “a serious complication of pregnancy associated with the development of high blood pressure, edema (swelling) and protein in the urine. Women diagnosed with preeclampsia may also complain of blurred vision, headaches, and experience greater than normal weight gain.” (Kecia Gaither).

Though I cannot recall the day I was told about my condition, I do remember being told that my blood pressure was never elevated. The doctors did not understand how this was possible and so they were apprehensive. Turns out I had a high amount of protein in my urine, and my legs and feet were beyond swollen. During my pregnancy, there were days when it was difficult to walk or stand for extended periods of time. Eventually, I was checked into the hospital early due to complications and couple of days later, on Valentine’s Day, I gave birth to my beautiful baby.

She was born through emergency C-section after her heart rate started to decrease. When she arrived the umbilical cord was wrapped around her neck twice. In labor, my

blood pressure spiked, but she came safe and sound; however, I could not help but think these complications were because of my selfishness when it came to my academic and performance. I was happy that she was okay but sad that I had not embraced my pregnancy more.

During the rehearsals of *Eda*, I chose not to share information about my pregnancy with the ensemble. I felt responsible for them in a way. I was the 3<sup>rd</sup> year graduate student preparing for her thesis role; I should be unifying the group through vocal warm-ups and energy exercises. However depending on the way the wind blew I would find myself exhausted or find walking extremely painful. I was taking Movement every other day and rehearsing every day; so, when the two days combined I would find myself beyond exhausted. On these days, again depending on my body, I would not be able to participate fully in the warming up process in rehearsals but more specifically the physical warm up.

Tia Davis was also the choreographer and would lead the physical warm-ups. Her background in dance influenced a lot of the physical activities, and it was awesome because we were dancing in the show and by doing these exercises we were training those body parts. The physical work could get intense depending on where we were in the rehearsal process. If we were focusing more on dance that day, then the warm up would simultaneously revolve around dance. The energy level was heightened and dancing was fun; it got your body temperature rising, which meant I had to be sure to watch my blood pressure, especially after being diagnosed with preeclampsia.

When I was able to participate, I forgot about my pregnancy. I transformed into a man; thus, my focus was constantly on how a man would move his body when dancing,

walking and sitting, rather than allowing the woman in me to take over. Tia unknowingly helped with my movements when she would distinguish between the dances. She would split us up, teach us the part(s) of the routine or exercise by *gender* and then combine the group together to watch us perform. There were times that we also stood in two lines and danced from one end of the room to the other end and back again. As an ensemble the atmosphere was filled with laughter; it felt like a safe environment; however, when I could not participate, I felt myself becoming the outsider.

I started to watch another actor (Darren) within our ensemble who is blind. His condition was not something he could escape by simply not talking about it; he had to voice it for safety concerns. One difference between him and me was that he embraced his circumstances. This truly was to be admired. He came to rehearsals on time; participated in *everything*, and he was always in good spirits. He never had a moment (that I saw) when he refused to acknowledge his situation, in fact, it added something extra to his characters, he allowed himself to play freely. He did not seek sympathy, because his circumstance did not define him. He was blind, that was a fact; however, he was not incapable of performing.

Watching him inside and out of rehearsals, I became inspired. Who said that motherhood had to wait? Why were we told that we are incapable of performing because of our circumstances? Anyone who doubted someone's ability to perform without being a liability had not seen Darren. He did not allow people to box him in, and for the most part they did not; however, I would hear some of the actors talk about him or I would catch them staring. Some of the ensemble members may not have intended to speak to him a certain way or stare, but they did, and this really kept me from sharing my situation.

Tia was magnificent at assisting Darren, she never treated him like he could not do it, and the same can be said about the director. They took their time and made him comfortable, especially with the dances. Tia and I are best friends, and when we were in rehearsals, she felt the need to protect me, and so she changed the choreography to accommodate me but without asking whether I could do something or not. Other times she would forget that I was pregnant and required me to do certain exercises that I could not do because of the intensity. She would ask me in front of everyone why I was not participating, and naturally I was approached (during break) and questioned about my participation or lack thereof. I did not want this attention. I genuinely appreciated their concerns, but I did not wish to take the focus away from the rehearsal, and I did not want any restrictions between me and the cast, so when approached, I would blame my lack of participation in warm ups on my movement class, stating that I had already warmed up.

During rehearsals I attempted to remain in character, even when we were on breaks, and this helped me to maintain my dialect. Everyman had many scenes that required him to collapse to the floor; however, there was one scene imparticular that required an abundance of stamina which was with Owo (money). Owo, was hidden in a trunk and once pushed opened, out came the personification of money, with many jewels hanging from its neck, fingers and face. Gold everywhere. After Eda asks Owo to follow him to heaven, Owo refuses and shows who is really in charge. In rehearsal we worked this scene many ways; while doing so, Owo would push me to the floor or force me to sit down. It was an incredible scene and both the other actor and I were comfortable working it.

I do believe however, that had I told the artist I was expecting, she may have had reservations when it came to specific tasks required for the scene. To eliminate the possibility of that happening, I took the choice away. I knew that neither my director nor I would place myself in a compromising position. I had control over my body, so whenever I did a stunt, I would land a certain way instead of lying flat on my stomach. It was my job as both mother and actor to make sure that those aware of my pregnancy felt secure and trusted me because I trusted myself.

As rehearsals progressed, my concerns began to extend towards costumes. I was not sure if I should tell them or not. During my first fitting, everything fit correctly; however, there would be moments when the designers would have to make adjustments on the costume with me in it. I wondered if they would notice the shape of my belly, but they did not, which let me know they were not interested in my personal affairs. Their primary concern was that the costumes fit well.



### 3<sup>rd</sup> TRIMESTER

*Whether your pregnancy was meticulously planned, medically coaxed, or happened by surprise, one thing is certain – your life will never be the same.*

*- Catherine Jones*

#### *Academics and Pregnancy*

Throughout my pregnancy, I stressed continuously. As mentioned, I was worried about not being able to complete my academics. There were times when I wanted to convince myself that I could do it all, however; as I began to research I realized I was not the only one with worries about motherhood and academics. "...Academic women have children but experience inordinate distress as they try to balance career and family." was a statement written in Michele L. Vancour and William M. Sherman's "Academic Life Balances for Mother's: Pipeline or Pipe Dream" (O'Reily 235).

As a student and performer prior to getting pregnant, I struggled with maintaining academic responsibilities as well as home and social life. Beginning graduate school, I was here alone and so everything I did revolved around school. I could pick up the phone to call my fiancée or family and talk to them, but it was not difficult. The difficult part or the part that I needed to juggle was when my fiancée came to live with me. My stress level was elevated on a day-to-day basis because of demands that needed to be met; and so, the thought of bringing a child into this world was not a thought in my mind, because I knew those demands would only increase.

Graduate school had started to take its toll on me the 1<sup>st</sup> year, but I was determined to succeed. I would feel overwhelmed at times, but eventually I got the hang of things. If I managed time accurately, I did not feel a sense of urgency to complete tasks but once this pregnancy became a reality, I knew time was limited.

In the fall of 2014, I was teaching two non-majors courses and was enrolled in Movement, Tools for a Global Theatre and Graduate Acting IV, and was also in rehearsals for *Eda*. My home life involved my fiancée who had been supportive and encouraging but also desired companionship, as well as my two dogs who were pups themselves. Prior to pregnancy, none of this was as stressful because I had come up with a schedule that worked and allowed me to have flexibility, but now, I needed to add various doctors' appointments that caused me to become weary. Since I was considered high risk, I was to schedule my appointments during a particular block of time that conflicted with my required courses. It was difficult to explain to my professors why I was late, or why I would not be there that day. This started to affect my grades tremendously, but I did not feel comfortable enough to tell them about my pregnancy. I spoke to my doctor about my concerns, and she decided to work with me. There were times when I could make appointments during regular hours and other times I would need to come during the high-risk hours, but I would give my professors notice ahead of time if an appointment coincided with class.

There were many moments throughout this pregnancy that I feared I would not graduate. I felt that I was not giving enough at home or at school. I found myself attempting to go bigger even when I knew I did not have the energy to do so. I did not want to let anyone down, so many people had fought for me to remain in this graduate

program and I felt that I would be letting them down if I did not force myself to work harder than everyone else. I felt that my pregnancy was the last straw and if I let it affect me I would not graduate. I made sure to come to class early, volunteer for everything and be alert. At home, it was difficult as well. I would find myself sluggish, but would constantly put forth an effort to be there for my fiancée, as well as my dogs. I never wanted anyone to say I could not succeed due to my pregnancy. I did not want to think that I would not succeed. I was determined. “Academic mothers may feel pressure to be superwomen-perfect mothers and successful career women” (Vancour, Sherman, O’Reily, 235). This notion occurs when a woman feels that she will let down those who are depending on her. This statement suggests that although no one has told the pregnant woman that she has to be “superwoman”, that ideology is ingrained in her psyche. The fear of failing is what inhibits some actors from fully freeing themselves. This stress level is heightened for the pregnant performer, especially if she has other obligations that need to be fulfilled.

All my courses required some form of performance and research papers. I was attempting to memorize all of Everyman’s lines and juggle course work, and then I had to grade papers from my students -- and my fiancée wanted more time. I felt the need to make sure I was giving 200% of myself at all times. I did not want to risk receiving my evaluations and being told that I was “slacking,” nor did I want my husband-to-be feeling like I was not there for him. If I told the faculty that I was pregnant, I feared the possibility of being kicked out of the program, even though Professor Burton said they could not do that. I believed there was the chance that my pregnancy would be used

against me in my performance review. I did not know what to do, but I knew I did not want to confess to anyone my dilemmas.

I decided not to tell anyone about my pregnancy until the end of the semester but as classes progressed, I realized I could not keep this a secret any longer. Professors were demanding more from us, and my doctors required me to come in twice every week instead of once due to preeclampsia. Movement was becoming increasingly difficult. We were doing exercises that required students to lay on their backs and roll over flat on their stomachs. This was called Superman and hugging a bear. You'd lay flat on your stomach and fly like Superman, and then turn on your back and hug an imaginary bear. I did the exercise, half committed. It was at this point that I realized I was causing more harm to the baby, myself, and my academics; I needed to share this information with my professors and the chair.

I was surprised by the support that I received from the faculty, and like Professor Burton said, I was not ejected due to my pregnancy. Professors modified part of the curriculum so that I could participate in the more intense work and, like in rehearsals, I could sit out when I needed to. Some of the faculty felt I needed to inform the other students about the pregnancy, but I was not ready for that quite yet. The fact that I told the faculty about my situation allowed the department to prepare for the next term. They needed to fill my position as Studio Coordinator as well as find another instructor for my teaching courses once I went on pregnancy leave. I was relieved, now all I had to do was prepare for mommy-hood.

*The Big Reveal: Mother's Choice*

As noted above the expectant mother undergoes many changes to carry her child full term. Upon dealing with doctors and families, she may desire a “normal” conversation with friends, normal in the sense that it is not just talking about her baby. People tend to concern themselves with the needs of the unborn child without realizing that they have neglected the mother’s needs. Being cooed over is something that we use primarily for infants and children; yet, it can easily be transferred to the mother-to-be. When approaching the expectant mother, be aware of her personal space. Realizing that even though she is bringing forth life, her life needs and desires remain the same for the most part. Awareness of one’s distance is essential, as well as the ability to recognize the woman and not just the belly.

As a performer, having a child during the early stages of your career is scary. On one hand, depending on who you are, you want to celebrate; on the other hand, you start to question whether you can have a career and be a mother too. If the woman chooses to reveal that she is pregnant, there should be no penalty against her. The assumption is that she will not be able to perform certain roles because of how far along she is or if she is showing, which may be true and should absolutely be taken into consideration; however, the fact that she *can* perform, should be taken into consideration as well. The performer may not be seeking the role of the leading lady, she just wishes not to be benched.

As in television and film, costume designers may be able to create costumes to conceal the expectant mommy’s baby bump (if she has one). Although these are two different sectors, the fact still remains that it can often be done. Changes can be made, and the experience for the performer can be an enlightening one and a

memory that can be shared between the expectant mother and child one day. Expectant mothers, ask not to be disenfranchised because of what many may consider a handicap. The talented artist, like many, desires a chance to succeed based on her talents, not her looks. Unfortunately and unapologetically, a lot of the industry does not care and does not offer many opportunities to the expectant mother, which is why she may refuse to discuss her current state. Fairness and equality do not apply to everyone, if this were the case, there would be no need for discrimination laws.

The pregnant actor dives into her work like everyone else, regardless of her situation. She comes in on time and prepares herself; the only difference is she is developing inside and out. Whatever the purpose for the pregnant actor in the rehearsal room, she is there for a reason and should be treated like she wants to be treated, not how others assume she should be treated. In regards to revealing her pregnancy in auditions and rehearsals, it all depends on the circumstances surrounding that production, for example, the duration of the production and/or the level of intense physicality within the play. The performer should consider telling the stage manager and director, the costume designer, and of course, if there is dancing, she should notify the choreographer. But no one else is required to know.

Mackenzie said that people told her congratulations before she had a chance to reveal her pregnancy. Once *Eda* concluded, about two months later, I decided to reveal my pregnancy to my classmates. Everyone seemed genuinely excited, however, I found that my personal space was constantly being invaded. Classmates began to rub my belly or even sing to it, without my permission. Spatial

awareness was not present, I was always clamped between people and if I sat away, naturally they wanted to make sure I was okay, but sometimes I did not feel like being bothered. I did not want them worried about whether or not I would be able to participate in class or do the group assignments. It also felt like the touching was never ending, and I felt a little odd, especially since I was not extremely close to a lot of them. Which probably provokes the question, why did I tell them in the first place? That is simple. I told them because I knew I would be going on pregnancy leave very soon and I did not want anyone gossiping about me. If I told people I held the power and that would not be taken away from me.

## CONCLUSION

Pregnancies can occur at any time with or without warning, still, the pregnant woman does not have to tell her employer she is expecting. She is protected under EEOC and the Civil Rights Act. Legally, there is no obligation for her to reveal her situation to the employer. However, it is her *responsibility* to understand what that means. The position in which she is employed can have lasting effects on her and her growing child depending on her work environment. At doctor's appointments, the OB should be aware of her working environment, and she should always prepare to keep herself hydrated and fed. She should never put herself in a situation that may be dangerous for her, the child or anyone surrounding her when it comes to performance.

As a performer, I found that revealing my pregnancy to the necessary persons allowed me to relax and start embracing it. I was supported when I decided to inform important parties about my situation and it also helped me to embrace the character I was performing. With that being said, choosing to reveal my pregnancy on my own time, was more helpful for me in my creative process. I believe that by allowing herself the freedom to create, the pregnant performer also gives her ensemble the opportunity to do the same.

I remain firm in my belief that had I told the cast that I was pregnant, the focus would have been on my stomach more than the play. I received support from my professors even if it meant undesired attention at times. As a performer, you have to trust



your instincts; this means, placing a level of confidence in someone, so that if ever you need to sit, they know why.

The choice to be able to procreate should not cause anxiety; if one experiences this, it is probably a good time to discuss a plan of action with someone you love. By doing this, you're allowing that anxiety to exit your body, rather than holding on to it. Through this plan, you may find various solutions to your problem, especially if you find yourself pregnant and performing. Having support outside of your workplace is very helpful, especially when it comes to voicing concerns about your pregnancy. If the performer does decide to tell the director or stage manager, or anyone else of importance, they must support the performer, because it probably has taken a lot of courage for her to talk about the pregnancy.

Although it is against the law to discriminate against pregnancy, some employers may find it easier to avoid pregnant women at all costs. This is unfortunate, but as a performer, you have the right to unveil your pregnancy if you feel it is necessary. If a performance will endanger you, your child or persons surrounding you, it's best to come up with a plan of action. By law, the expectant mother is not required to tell, however, remember what that entails. It is up to the pregnant performer to take care of herself and her belly. She reserves the rights to the unveiling of her pregnancy and she holds the right to tell when she is ready, not when people are ready for her to tell.

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CURRICULM VITAE  
Takayla Williams

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EDUCATION

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*University of Louisville*

Master of Fine Arts Graduate Candidate 2015  
Major: Acting 2015

*University of Louisville*

African American Graduate Certificate 2015  
Major: African American Theatre

*Clark Atlanta University*

Bachelor of Arts: Theatre Arts 2011

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AWARDS/HONORS

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- Graduate Teaching Assistant 2012-2015
- Diversity in Excellence 2015
- Arts and Sciences Tuition Wavier 2012-2015
- Undergraduate Studies Scholarship  
Clark Atlanta University 2008,2011
- Dean's List, Clark Atlanta University 2009-2011
- Horizon Theatre Young Playwrights Festival 2011
- National Black Theatre Festival Colligete Playwright Award 2011

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ACADEMIC TEACHING EXPERIENCE

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Bellarmino University

Adjunct Professor: THEA 110-03 August 2015-May 2016

Acting I is both an introduction to the discipline of acting and an opportunity to increase self-awareness, confidence and an understanding of the human experience. This course will focus on the concept of acting as behaving truthfully in imaginary

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circumstances. Using a variety of exercise and projects, we will explore levels of awareness and connection used in acting: relation to self, others, the text, and the audience.

University of Louisville, Louisville, KY

Adjunct Professor: Acting Non-Majors 324

Summer 2015

Acting Non-Majors 324

2013-2015

To introduce the student to the process of acting, the role of the actor and the demands/training involved. Duties include but not limited to, creating syllabus, creating/grading quizzes, lectures and guiding students through all course work

Fundamentals of Theatre 207 Recitation

2012-2013

To help guide students in discussions from previous lectures. Duties include but not limited to writing/grading quizzes, leading discussions, and lectures revolving around critical thinking skills, communication skills, and understanding and appreciating cultural diversity,

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#### RELATED EXPERIENCE

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St. Joe's Children's Home, Louisville, KY

Teaching Assistant

Summer 2014

*Bright Start Learning Center, Louisville, KY*

Teaching Assistant

Summer 2012

#### ACADEMIC INTERESTS

- Adapting Medieval Texts/ Everyman
- Screen Writing
- Directing
- Playwrighting
- African American Theatre and Film
- Acting for Television/Radio and Film

#### SELECTED SERVICE TO THE PROFESSIONAL

- KCACTF Participate Actress in Play Winner *Grande Finale*

#### COMMITTED AND SERVICE

- Studio Theatre Graduate Coordinator, University of Louisville

- Birdie Awards, University of Louisville
- CAU Players Vice President, Clark Atlanta University
- CAU Players Treasurer, Clark Atlanta University
- CAU Players Secretary, Clark Atlanta University

WORK EXPERIENCE:

05/2014-08/2014

St. Joseph's Childrens Home  
Louisville, Kentucky

CDC Teacher Assistant: Instructs children in activities designed to promote social, physical, and intellectual growth needed for child development facility by performing the following duties. Responsibilities will include assisting in the planning, supervising, and implementing Creative Curriculum within the Center's goals and philosophy. This staff person is a supportive force for the lead teacher. The assistant will work directly with the children under the guidance of the lead teacher.

05/2013- 08/2013

Bright Start  
Louisville, Kentucky

Teacher's Assistant/Floater: Assistant teachers in daycare centers work with children to provide a safe and nurturing environment for social and academic growth. Provide supervision, discipline and other forms of general care, in addition to helping with instruction and clerical work.

08/2011-2012

Taco Bell  
Atlanta, Georgia

Shift Manager: Shift Leads assist on training new Team Members and scheduling work shifts to ensure that it will run efficiently. Primary responsibilities include training and motivating new and old Team Members, interact with customers and manage customer issues while maintaining the highest quality of products and services. Shift Leads also need to monitor all service equipment and supplies during their shift and make sure that everything is in working condition.

07/2010 – 01/2011

Lake Worth Surgical  
Lake Work, Florida

File Clerk: To manage the maintenance and processing of patient records. Primary responsibilities included verifying patient eligibility and Physician's license; patient registration; scheduling field staff assignments.

08/2008 – 05/2010

Ihop  
Loganville, Georgia

Server: Develop and maintain professional functional working relationships with IHOP employees and guests. Execute the "Service Success Steps: per the IHOP Standard Operating Procedures (SOP) to ensure a high-quality guest experience. Handle guest experience. Handle guest complaints using L.A.A.F. procedures promptly, inquire about the quality of the dining experience, thank guests, and invite them to return. Communicate guests' food orders and service requests to appropriate team members to meet guests' expectations. Memorize and apply IHOP terminology, abbreviations, methodologies, and plating and menu knowledge. Stock and rotate all needed supplies in the service areas and dining room. Comply with all local and SOP health, sanitation, and safety guidelines. Clear, clean, reset tables, clean chairs, booths, and floors after guests leave. Perform all cleaning duties assigned by the General Manager, Assistant Manager, acting supervisor and Crew Chief. The physical demands are representative of those that must be met to perform the essential functions of this job successfully. Frequently required to stand, walk, stoop, kneel, crouch, or crawl, talk or hear, and taste or smell. Must occasionally lift and/or move up to 25 pounds.

06/2008 – 05/2010

Nanny  
Monroe, Georgia

Nanny: Provide full-time child care for children in the employer's home. Duties include including shopping, cooking, preparing bottles, changing diapers, ironing and mending, supervising baths, educating and/or amusing the children by reading and taking them on outings.

09/2005 – 01/2008

Sears Roebuck  
Palm Beach Gardens, Florida

Sales Associate: To deliver seamless customer service and shopping experience also to show off negotiation skills, problem-solving skills, and basic computer skills. Also the ability to understanding and strive to meet the needs of others with the able to come up with customer solutions/ideas even under trying circumstances. Dependability demonstrated regular and predictable attendance and accurate on time completion of assignments and duties

09/2001 – 08/2005

McDonalds  
Jupiter, Florida

Crew Trainer: Provide service customer service also this position handles on the floor training with new employees. They must be a leader and have good communication skills. Also required to watch the store if the manager could not make it.

HOBBIES/INTERESTS: Writing, Acting, Directing, Dancing, Swimming

EDUCATION: University of Louisville, Louisville, Kentucky  
M.F.A Acting- December 2015

Clark Atlanta University, Atlanta, Georgia  
B.A. Theater Arts – May 2011

REFERENCES: Available upon request