

MOM, HOW DID YOU MEET THE BEATLES?

Pre-Show Talk Outline

I. Introduction

- a) Welcome to the pre-show talk for Forward Theater's regional premiere production of *Mom, How Did You Meet the Beatles?*, by Adrienne Kennedy and Adam P. Kennedy.
- b) For those of you who are new to Forward Theater, here's a brief history: Forward was founded in 2009 by professional actors, designers, playwrights, and directors in the Madison area.
- c) Forward's Mission: To provide a home base for Wisconsin theater professionals and audiences that will expand the cultural and economic life of the greater Madison area.
- d) *Mom, How Did You Meet the Beatles* is the first show of our **thirteenth** season as a company and our **tenth** season as a resident company at Overture Center for the Arts!
- e) The purpose of this pre-show talk is to provide you with some context to better appreciate our production of *Mom, How Did You Meet the Beatles*. We are thrilled that we are once again performing onstage at the Playhouse in front of a live audience. But for those of you who plan to watch a recording of the show at home instead, please know that what you'll be watching won't be like a movie. We videotaped a live performance with the deliberate goal of making you feel like you're sitting in the very best seat in the house, and we hope that you will feel transported to the theater as you watch it. For those of you watching this presentation who will be seeing the show live and in person, welcome back! Enjoy once again sharing space with all of us as we start another season of telling amazing stories.

II. Source Material, Playwrights, etc.:

- a) Before I begin, I want to make sure to thank Khalid Y. Long, who was the dramaturg on this production. He assembled a rich body of research for the actors and design team, and some of that material is reflected in this talk.
- b) I always like to start the pre-show talk by telling you about the playwright, or, in the case of this show, playwrights. Because without them, we wouldn't have a play. *Mom, How Did You Meet the Beatles* was written by Adrienne Kennedy and her son, Adam P. Kennedy.
- c) Adrienne Kennedy is one of contemporary America's most renowned and admired African American authors, lecturers, and playwrights. She was born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania on September 13, 1931, and spent her childhood in Cleveland, Ohio, where she attended public schools. She graduated from Ohio State University with a B.A in Education in 1953. In May of that same year she wed Joseph C. Kennedy with whom she had two children. After the birth of her oldest son, Kennedy continued to pursue her education by attending Columbia University, the

American Theatre Wing, the New School of Social Research, and Circle in the Square Theatre School. Kennedy also participated in Edward Albee's Theatre Workshop, in New York City.

- d) Kennedy is most known for her role in the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s and early 1970s, and was a founding member of the Women's Theatre Council. In 1964, her play *Funnyhouse of a Negro* opened Off-Broadway. That play was followed by many more, including *The Owl Answers*, *Ohio State Murders* and *She Talks to Beethoven*. These plays blazed a trail in the American Theatre, and her body of work has had a profound influence on American playwrights.
- e) Her plays have enriched our concept of what's possible on stage for the past thirty years and given us a vocabulary of dramatic technique no other writer has explored: the fragmentation of identity, the haunting use of repetition, the creation of elegiac language, an alienation of/and from canonical literature, and the journeys of race, gender, and sexual ruptures from the scripted and policed behaviors that a dominant culture has enforced.
- f) Adam P. Kennedy is the other author of our show. Adrienne Kennedy's youngest son, he is a writer and a publisher. He is the creator of the television show "Africa/U.S.A.: The Connection and The World Connection," which aired on network television and PBS. He also received an Obie Award for Best New American Play for *Sleep Deprivation Chamber*, co-authored with his mother, which was produced by Signature Theatre Company in 1996.
- g) Adam is the co-founder of Abandon Entertainment, a television and film production company, as well as a publishing company. His *Chronicling Greatness and American Heroes of War Series* presents the Greatest Warriors and Leaders in Modern American Military History, and he has interviewed over 150 combat veterans from WW II to Vietnam.
- h) *Mom, How Did You Meet the Beatles* came about when Adam took his mother out to lunch on her 75th birthday. After the meal, Adam switched on a tape recorder and asked, "How did you come to work with the Beatles?" For the next hour, the two chatted about the time they'd spent in England from 1966 to 1969.
- i) In an interview, Adrienne Kennedy described that lunch this way: "My sons Joe and Adam, at least two or three times a year, they'd always ask me: "Mom, tell me again, how did you meet the Beatles?" It was my birthday, and Adam came from Virginia. We had lunch. And he said, "I have my tape recorder, and while we're sitting here I want you to tell me the whole thing." I was kind of irritated. I said, "I have told you the whole thing." He said, "No, you haven't. . . ." I was in a wonderful mood, so I said to myself, "I'm going to tell Adam everything I can remember."
- j) A few months after that lunch, Adam mailed his mother a typed copy of their conversation. Reading through it, Adrienne recognized the rhythms of a play. She sent the transcript to a number of artistic directors, including the Public Theater's Oskar Eustis, who decided to use the Kennedys' piece, now called *Mom, How Did You Meet the Beatles?*, to open the Public Lab series in 2008.

- k) Adrienne Kennedy's most recent play is *He Brought Her Heart Back in a Box*, which premiered Off-Broadway in 2018. For her outstanding literary work Kennedy has received a Guggenheim Fellowship, the Anisfield-Wolf Lifetime Achievement Book Award, the Stanley Award, and in 1990 the American Book Award. Adrienne Kennedy resides in New York City and continues to share her talents by lecturing at various institutions.

III. Synopsis of *Mom, How Did You Meet the Beatles?*

- a) *Mom, How Did You Meet the Beatles* is primarily an autobiographical work -- a memoir play about Adrienne and Adam Kennedy's time in London in the 60s.
- b) In 1966 Ms. Kennedy, separated from her husband and living with her 5-year-old son in the West Village in New York City, found herself at loose ends, faced with the uneasy question that regularly shadows the lives of all artists: What next?
- c) She was soon commissioned by Theodore Mann, the artistic director of the Circle in the Square, to write a new play. Ms. Kennedy hit upon the idea of adapting John Lennon's books of nonsense prose and poetry, "In His Own Write" and "A Spaniard in the Works." Through the grapevine came the noncommittal word that if she happened to find herself in London, she might look up Lennon's publisher.
- d) Two days later she and Adam were on a plane, with a list of British theater contacts and little else. The story that follows sees Ms. Kennedy entering the swinging sixties world of London, where pop stars, movie stars, and literary giants seemed to be on every street corner and in every sitting room. Ms. Kennedy does, indeed, meet the Beatles, as well as Laurence Olivier, James Earl Jones, James Baldwin, and many others. But the process of writing and producing the play doesn't go as planned, and there-in lies the drama of *Mom, How Did You Meet the Beatles?*

IV. Themes: The 1960s in Britain; Documentary Theater

- a) The 'Swinging Sixties' remain the defining decade for Britain. World War II took a grave toll on Britain. Rationing was still in place as late as 1954, and even in 1960, London was still a bleak, conservative city, putting itself back together emotionally and physically from the bombings of the Blitz. But in just ten short years, London was transformed into the capital of the world, full of freedom, hope and promise. It was the center of all excitement; the city where anything and everything was possible.
- b) One of the biggest defining aspects of Britain in the 1960s was music. In the 1950s, much like everywhere else in the world, Britain's music scene was dominated by the birth of rock and roll. It wasn't until the early Sixties and the emergence of 'British Invasion' groups like The Beatles, that music truly began its revolutionary changes. The Beatles are an excellent example of how music influenced the lives of young Britons. The Beatles hit the world stage in 1964, but they had already started to change the face of the British music scene years earlier. For much of the first half of the decade, the British invasion groups still owed much of their sound to rock and roll. But by the mid-sixties, that began to change.

And by 1967, Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band became the turning point in music and inspired other musicians to experiment with new sounds and develop innovative pieces of music. Popular music continued to evolve, and began including lyrics that encouraged listeners to rebel against the norm. Young people followed the lead, and began to stand up for their beliefs and their individuality.

- c) The 1960s also saw a real flowering of popular music styles beyond just rock and roll: jazz, pop, and folk music all gathered devoted listeners in the 1960s. And rock and roll continued to grow as a musical form, with a clear split between "hard," rebellious rock and lighter, "soft" rock.
- d) Recreational drugs were also synonymous with the Sixties and became more commonly used in the latter part of the decade. The effects of these drugs were also reflected in psychedelic art and films, bringing new, vibrant and exciting colors and patterns to the forefront. The Beatles' 'Yellow Submarine' film with its combination of psychedelic pictures and music illustrates this perfectly.
- e) Although Britain wasn't directly involved in the Vietnam War, British musicians such as John Lennon brought it to the attention of British people through protests against the conflict. And fans followed in the footsteps of their idols to pursue peace and freedom. This became one of the biggest aspects associated with the 'hippie' movement. People began to challenge and question authority, something that would have been unheard of a decade ago.
- f) Fashion in the decade mirrored many of the social changes of the Sixties. British designer Mary Quant became famous for popularizing the mini skirt which became the epitome of 1960s fashion. The mini was designed to be liberating for women, who were now free to wear more playful, youthful clothes that would have seemed outrageous ten years before. By the late Sixties, psychedelic prints and vibrant colors began appearing on clothes (and everywhere else) as the hippie movement gathered pace.
- g) Feminism began to become a more influential ideology in Britain as more jobs became available to young women in the Sixties. This allowed them to move away from home and become more independent. The contraceptive pill became legalized for all women in 1967 and gave them the opportunity to broaden their hopes and dreams beyond motherhood and marriage. Furthermore, women were becoming increasingly involved in politics. For example, in 1968, Barbara Castle became the first woman to be appointed British Secretary of State, and women began finding a voice in society and the running of the country.
- h) Technological advancements of the 1960s drastically changed how people spent their leisure time. Color television and pocket transistor radios allowed people to spend their free time listening to music and watching TV. The microwave oven shortened the amount of time women spent in the kitchen, further allowing them more freedom and time to enjoy themselves. By the end of the decade, Britain was almost unrecognizable from the country it had been at the beginning of the 60s, and seemed poised at the start of a new era of optimism, with the ability to dream for something bigger and better.

i) **Documentary Theater:**

I now want to turn our focus to the US to give some history of the genre of theater in which *Mom, How Did You Meet the Beatles* fits. Khalid Long found a terrific essay by the dramaturg and director Jules Odendahl-James where he asserts that both in content and form, documentary theatre in the U.S. has always been at theatre's cutting edge. American documentary theatre (also sometimes called docudrama, ethnodrama, verbatim theatre, or tribunal theatre of witness) is performance typically built by an individual or collective of artists from historical and/or archival materials such as trial transcripts, written or recorded interviews, visual images or video footage, government documents, biographies and autobiographies, and sometimes even academic papers and scientific research.

- j) Odendahl-James identifies three periods of American Theatrical Docudrama. The first period of innovation in this form in America took place in the 1930s, primarily in work created under the auspices of the Federal Theater Project. Their "living newspapers," a form itself borrowed from agitprop and worker's theatre in Western Europe and Russia, drew content from everyday life, particularly the experiences of first- and second-generation working-class immigrants. Their form was decidedly modernist, and artists primarily crafted and performed them as an educative or cultural service, using techniques that may or may not have resonated with the people whose stories were being depicted.
- k) That tension helped to form the second key moment of development in the late 1960s, when the Civil Rights movement, the Vietnam War, global economic upheaval, and the newly dominant televisual mass media compelled a new generation of theatre collectives to explore, and ultimately explode the formal and aesthetic properties of documentary. As artists questioned dominant media and state narratives around economic and social oppression, democracy, equality, and the rule of law, energy shifted away from conventionally structured plays and theatre spaces toward unbounded and unscripted events ("happenings") as well as multimedia installations and durational work that tested artists' and audience's physical capacities. At the same time, the impulse to craft a theatrical world from real lives, experiences, and places evolved into a rawer, distinctly autobiographical, artist-driven type of storytelling.
- l) This turn to artist as source material marks the third historical development in American documentary theatre. One of the best examples of this would be the work of Anna Deavere Smith. In Smith's work the primacy of written, archival documents takes a backseat to artist-collected, interview-based materials. Smith also functions as performer, presenting painstakingly studied and faithfully rendered bodies and voices (across race, ethnicity, and gender) using her own body as tabula rasa, activating new questions about truth and authenticity.
- m) *Mom, How Did You Meet the Beatles* is a play that was born of the sixties, and brought to life within this third era of documentary theater.
- n) Once again, I'd like to credit and thank Khalid Long for some of the material represented in this presentation. And I'll have details about how you can learn

even more from him about Adrienne Kennedy and all of the topics mentioned here at the end of this talk.

V. FTC's Vision & Production Design

Production team, apart from Forward staff members)

Director: Baron Kelly

Stage Manager: Sarah Deming Henes

Assistant Stage Manager: Abbi Hess

Scenic Designer: Kevin Gawley

Lighting and Projections Designer: Kevin Gawley

Costume Designer: Jason Orlenko

Properties Designer: Pamela Miles

Technical Director: Kevin Zimmer

Composer & Sound Designer: Christie Chiles Twillie

Dramaturg: Khalid Y. Long

Actors: Marti Gobel, Jamaica Gobel

1) *Mom, How Did You Meet the Beatles* is directed by Baron Kelly, who is a professor in the UW Theater Department. Kelly has a PhD in theater from the UW, an MFA in acting from California State University, and also studied acting at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art. When asked about what drew him to this play, he answered:

- a) “A lot of props to Forward Theater for wanting to do this play. Adrienne Kennedy is not known by a lot of people. And that’s an injustice. Adrienne Kennedy holds a place in the American Theater, particularly the avante garde movement, and I was excited to bring her work to the Madison audiences.”
- b) Baron went on to say, “I went to school in London and lived there for five years. And London is very much a part of my early training and development as an artist. So when I read this play, it all just gelled for me. I knew the particular references in the play.”
- c) He says, “I’m a geek when it comes to this stuff. I remember sitting in front of the TV set as an 8-year-old, watching classic movies and not knowing why they affected me so much. This started me on a quest to buy books and learn more about this period. I have hundreds of books about this era, including the golden age of Hollywood. This shows speaks to me in a particular way. I’m so drawn to what the power of what the experience of theater can be. It’s the basic humanity of people and telling stories. Adrienne Kennedy is filled with a lot of complexity, and contradictions, but at the core, she is a human being who is misunderstood, and who marginalized herself in the events of her life that are shown in this play. I hope we’ll be able to add another layer of human experience to her story.”

2) Set & Lighting Design: Kevin Gawley

- a) Kevin Gawley designed the sets, lights, and projections for this production. This is his first show designing for Forward.
- b) At the first rehearsal, Kevin said, “One of the challenges about this piece is creating an environment that can transform back and forth to the many locations

contained within a memory piece. We took a lot of inspiration for the set and projections from the line drawings of John Lennon's "In His Own Write" and "A Spaniard in the Works." That sort of rudimentary, almost child-like style shows up in some of the backgrounds you see throughout the show, and will help to ground us in particular locations. We also took color from the period – the popular rainbow colors of the Beatles (think Magical Mystery Tour and Yellow Submarine), as well as the rounded, cloud-like shapes. The world we're in should feel like a transformational space that can go anywhere it wants to go; and where the space is being rendered in front of our eyes, much in the way that a storyteller builds a world for her listeners as she speaks. There's also a nod to the Old Vic in the shape of the set, and caricatures of some of the people mentioned in the play."

- c) A popular event of the 60s were what were called Liquid Light Shows, and if you've ever watched a music video from the time, you'll know what I'm talking about. Kevin used a version of those liquid light shows to help with light as well as background – and to help convey the times when Adrienne's character feels overwhelmed – to create, as Baron calls it, the "fog of color."
- d) Baron and Kevin have worked together on several shows in the past -- everything from Shakespeare to Athol Fugard, and, as Baron says, "Kevin is always able to transfer my ideas, no matter how abstract they are, into concrete visions that he puts on stage. The danger for a piece like this is that you overwhelm the story with gimmicks. What Kevin has done is to compliment the piece. And it makes me realize why this particular piece has only been produced a few times, because you need the right *team* to pull it off. I knew that I had the right partner in Kevin. I wanted to make sure the words aren't being overpowered, but are instead supported, and that the design elements can help to transport the audience to the setting of London in the 60s, as well as to the 80s apartment where Adrienne is now telling the story to her son, Adam."

3) Costume Design: Jason Orlenko

- a) Costume Designer Jason Orlenko comes to us from Milwaukee, where he has worked with several theater companies, and is making his design debut at Forward Theater. Jason did a lot of research into Adrienne's clothes at the time of the story being told, and in the years since. He was particularly inspired by a line in the show when the character of Adrienne mentions wearing a knock-off Givenchy (*JHEE-vawn-shee*) coat. He used that as a jumping off point to design the coat she wears throughout the show.
- b) According to Baron, "Jason and Marti have worked together before, and from Day 1 he was spot on with the design and what works for Marti. He and I also experimented with how the clothes are used. We added things -- the small accessories that could aid in the development of the character, like a purse, and a cosmetic case. Back then, there was a certain way – a style to how those accessories were used, like the way a woman might bring out a fancy compact at the table. I think many of us have memories of a relative who would do that. The pieces we found, and the way that Marti uses them tells a lot about the character."

4) Props: Pamela Miles

- a) Pam Miles is in her eighth season as props master for Forward Theater. She is also a Scenic Charge Artist at American Players Theater. She was able to find props and set pieces that would bridge the two worlds of the 60s and 80s, and insure that the overall effect was harmonious.

5) Music and Sound: Christie Chiles Twillie (*TWILL-ee*)

- a) Christie Chiles Twillie is a Music Director, Sound Designer and Composer who is designing for her second show at Forward, having worked on last season's *The Niceties*.
- b) According to Christie, "This play has a very eclectic collection of songs from the era, starting from 1967 and moving forward. Lots of inspiration from British rock tunes, R&B artists from the States who influenced those British artists, Beatles tunes (of course), and a few selections from different movies that are references to Laurence Olivier, as well as some of the other film stars mentioned." In addition, there is an "Olivier's Theme": William Walton's "Crown Imperial" which is a very famous symphonic piece often associated with aristocratic events in the UK. There aren't a lot of additional atmospheric sound cues – those are used sparingly.
- c) Baron adds, "I'm a musician as well, and Christie is wonderful. We were able to have conversations about so many different types of music, from rock to classical, and her musical vocabulary is huge. It's been a wonderful way to bring the audience on the journey of this piece."

6) Dramaturg: Khalid Y. Long

- a) Khalid Y. Long's work as a dramaturg on this production was essential. He is an assistant professor of theatre, coordinator of theatre studies, and coordinator of dramaturgy at Columbia College Chicago, and this is his first project with Forward.
- b) Khalid said at the first rehearsal, "The Feminist Movement, Black Power Movement, and the Gay Rights Movement are some of the major movements to emerge from the 1960s. They all inspired artists in various genres and mediums to explore what it meant to be on the margins in the 60s. Realism dominated Broadway, but off and off-off Broadway featured artists who challenged the idea of realism, and those artists have come to be remembered as the major forces of theater in the 60s. Adrienne Kennedy's work was a part of that movement." Khalid put together a wealth of information and sources to help the team ground themselves in the era.

7) Cast

- a) Marti Gobel has appeared on the Forward Stage in several productions, including *In the Next Room, Mr. Burns*, and *Skeleton Crew*. She also directed our production of *Exit Strategy*. She plays Adrienne Kennedy in our production
- b) Jamaica Gobel makes his Forward Theater debut in the role of Adam. He has appeared on several stages in Milwaukee, and yes, he and Marti are mother and son in real life!

8) Things to Look For & Behind the Scenes Extras

- a) This show is rife with particular sounds and images that we hope might bring you back to a particular point in your life and spark particular memories. Baron says, “I encourage people to just relax and enjoy the sights and particularly the sounds in the production, because they mean things.” Be open to the journey that this show takes you on, and afterwards, think about what sparked those journeys.

VI. Community Engagement

- a) Forward has a strong commitment to creating additional programming to engage or enlighten our audiences about our productions. For *Mom, How Did You Meet the Beatles*, production dramaturg Khalid Long has put together a terrific symposium of three online panel discussions, all with different panels of experts. The topics are “Adrienne Kennedy and the Black Woman Playwright,” “Popular Culture and the 1960’s,” and “Writing Ourselves into History: Black Women and Autobiographical Writing.” In addition, the Cap Times Idea Fest will include an event featuring a discussion with Adam Kennedy. For dates and times of all of this programming, please visit the *Mom, How Did You Meet the Beatles* show page on our website.

VII. Conclusion

- a) Continue the conversation with us!
 - i) On Facebook
 - ii) At the live talkbacks, which take place after every show.
- b) Conclusion
 - i) Many thanks for joining me for this talk, and thank you for supporting local, professional theater. Enjoy the show!