

DRAMATURGICAL STATEMENT

Notes from Dr. Kristyl D. Tift, co-Dramaturg

Making Theatre in a Jazz Aesthetic

Aishah Rahman's *Unfinished Women Cry In No Man's Land While A Bird Dies In A Gilded Cage* was first produced at The New York Shakespeare Festival in 1977. Notably, it was produced a year after Ntozake Shange's *for colored girls/who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf*—a “choreopoem” upon which Rahman was clearly inspired. However, her dramatic literature does some things differently, as she bravely layers and weaves dissonant aesthetics, ideas, and characters together in unexpectedly comprehensible ways. Oakland Theatre Project rightly observes, “Rahman was ahead of her time in experimenting with form, mixing magical realism with sharp-edged comedy...” (<http://oaklandtheaterproject.org/mojo>, 1). The freedom she had to create and produce Africanist jazz theatre speaks to the impact of the Black Arts Movement and, specifically, the Black Revolutionary Theatre, which, however male-centric, made space for Rahman's meditations on the elisions of race, gender, class, sexuality, religion, and music.

Characterized by the playwright as a “polydrama,” the play conjoins what could have been two separate plays—one exploring teenage pregnancy in the 1950s and one exploring the demise of Bebop jazz saxophonist Charlie Parker. The play's structure, form, and language resist the confines of traditional Western art to privilege an Africanist worldview infused with a jazz sensibility. Troubling our notions of what a play should be, the oft-poetic language mimics the repetition and revision of jazz music—calling audiences to engage with it on a visceral level.

Africanisms & The Question of Choice

In *Unfinished Women*, time is cyclical; that is, the past, present, and future coexist. Incorporating Yoruba cosmology, Rahman insists that three worlds exist simultaneously—that of the unborn, the living and the dead. The two separate spaces in which these worlds exist are the Hide-A-Wee Home for Unwed Mothers and Pasha's Boudoir—spaces that connect Charlie Parker—the man, the legend, the music—to five teenage girls who love him. Wilma, Midge, Mattie, Consuelo, and Paulette must make a choice about whether to keep their babies or give them up for adoption on the day that Charlie Parker dies. Directing this play, I thought about how reproductive choice in the contemporary moment speaks to stories of teenage mothers of the past. I thought about the impact of substance abuse on our brightest stars. These musings, ultimately, led me to focus on the very notion of *choice*—how we come to choose what/who we choose and how we *live* with those choices.

As my co-dramaturg, Brazil Remani, illustrates in her dramaturgical statement, the women in maternity homes had little choice in being there. Sure, they could have run away or attempted to procure an abortion, but the shame and fear of ostracization, injury, or even death that women in these homes fear is enough to keep them from making either of those choices. The choices they have, therefore, are limited to 1) keeping one's baby or 2) giving the baby up for adoption. Either way, there is a loss of innocence and potential for these girl-women because they did not choose to be pregnant in the first place. Historically, women have had to make decisions about

reproduction, although, traditionally, it takes two to make a baby. The onus is on the girl-woman to choose the “better” option for their newborn with societal pressures informing that choice.

Blackface Minstrelsy & “The Invisible Man”

Setting the framework for the story—identifying the characters in the play, setting the scene, establishing time—Charlie Chan “the invisible man” moves in and through both spaces with ease. Because he can. A trickster archetype commonly found in African diasporic storytelling (plays, literature, poetry, music), he is an amalgamation of a minstrel, an emcee, and docile servant character. In film, television, and radio in the 20th century, Charlie Chan—an Asian-American detective character who often solved crimes—was the antithesis of the Eastern villain stereotype concocted by the Western imagination. Still, the character’s position of silent servitude strips Chan of his humanity and autonomy similar to white portrayals of black people vis a vis blackface minstrelsy, and black representations by such entertainers as George Walker and Bert Williams who had to perform in blackface in order to work in comedy.

That said, I would be remiss if I did not iterate that Charlie Chan, as written by the playwright, is a black minstrel. My creative decision not to keep this characterization in our production is informed by my cultural understandings of the implications of imposing that imagery on a 21st century audience. (It never occurred to me to do so.) Making this choice also opened the possibilities of who could play this emcee-servant, allowing me to round out the cast with the best performer for the role regardless of race/ethnicity. 2022 America presents a much different cultural and political landscape than 1977 America. The image of an actor (regardless of race/ethnicity) in blackface is jarring and can be deeply offensive to witness, especially as a black person. Ultimately, as a black woman director and scholar whose research in African American Theatre and Performance informs the practical work I do, I felt that this characterization was not necessary to present this story for a college-age audience. Nevertheless, it *was* important to me that the cast understand the playwright’s intention behind this character and the history of blackface minstrelsy—the most popular form of American entertainment in the 19th century (*see presentation below*).

*Unfinished
Women Cry In
No Man's Land
While A Bird
Dies In a Gilded
Cage*

Dr. Kristyl D. Tift
Friday, October 7, 2022
Furman Hall 106
Vanderbilt University

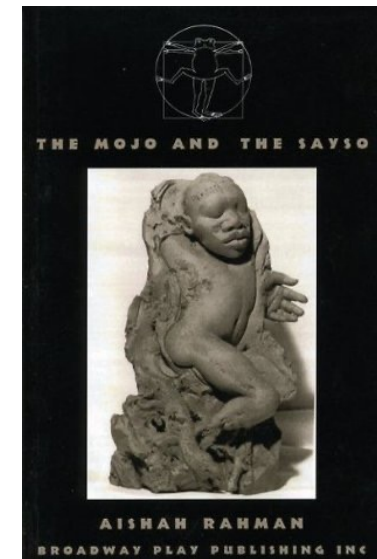
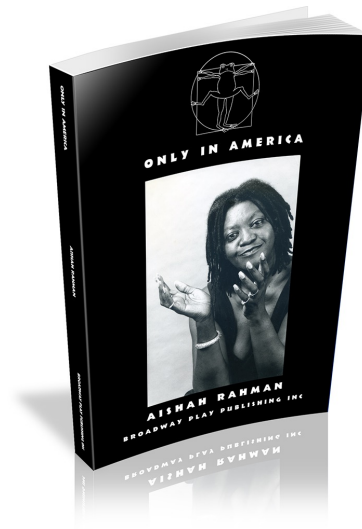
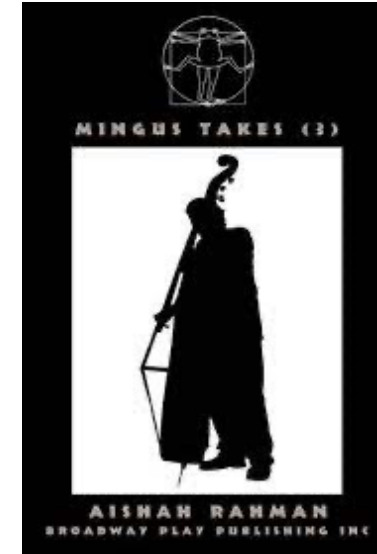
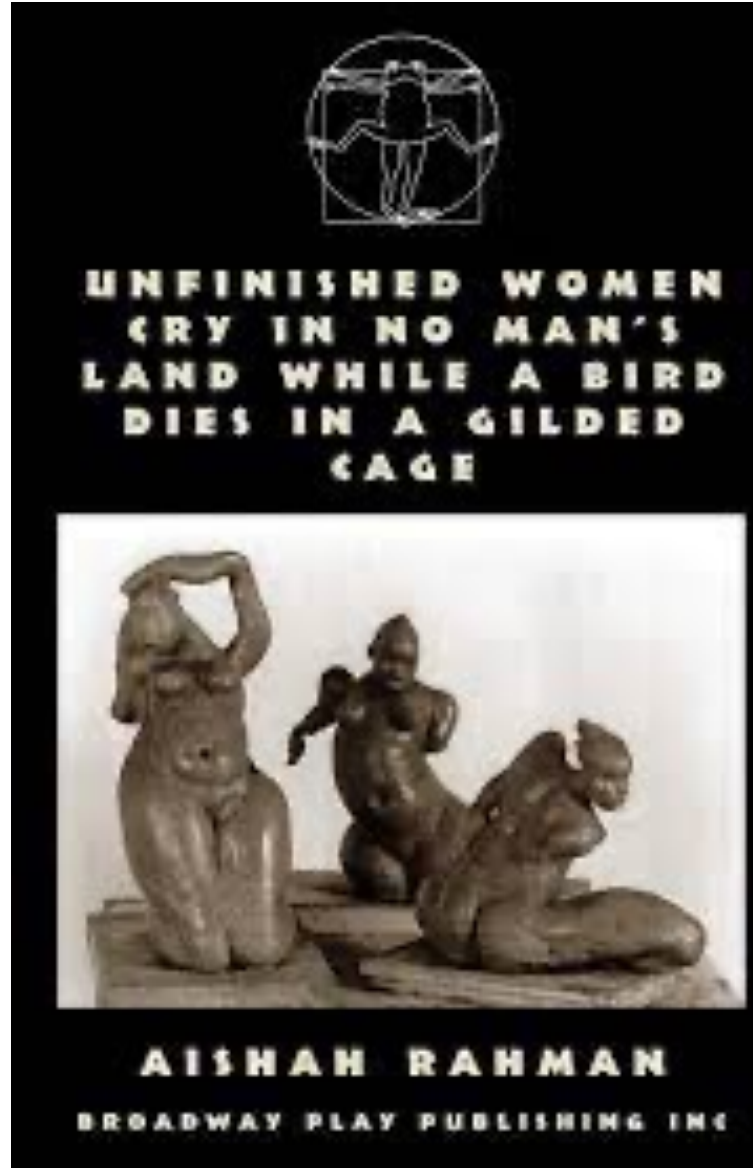
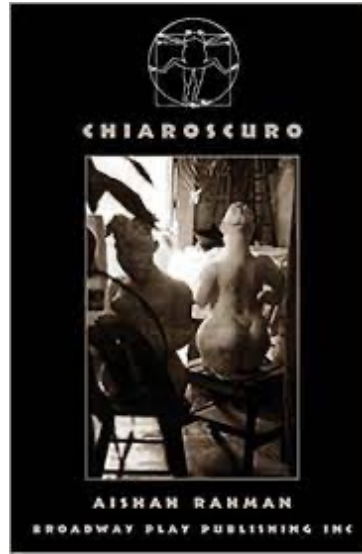



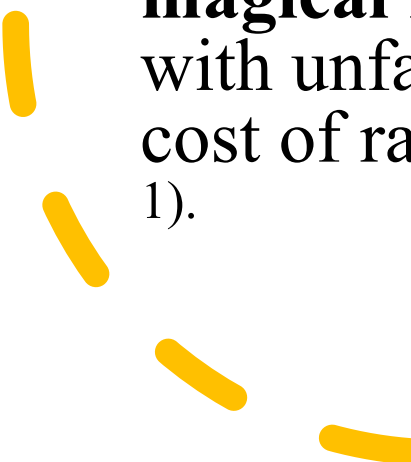
Aishah Rahman

(1936-2014)

- Born Virginia Hughes in Harlem, NY on November 4, 1936.
- Placed in foster care from 18 months old to 18 years old.
 - Experienced physical and mental abuse by her foster mother.
 - Became pregnant weeks before high school graduation.
- Graduated from Howard University and Goddard College.
- A playwright during the Black Arts Movement
 - Afrocentric
 - Jazz Aesthetic
- **Another popular play:**
 - [The Mojo and the Sayso](#) (1988) - Centers on the aftermath of the killing of a 10-year-old boy by NYPD in 1973.
- Professor of Literary Arts at Brown University (1992-2011)
- **Awards:** Doris Abramson Playwriting Award; Rockefeller Foundation Fellowship; New York Foundation for the Arts Fellowship





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- “Many of her plays incorporate the **use of music**; rather than simply a background device, the music in her plays **often echoes the rhythms of her character’s speech**. Music is central to the advancement of the storyline, and becomes **a metaphor for the struggles** in which the characters are engaged” (Williams, 480).
 - “Rahman was ahead of her time in **experimenting with form, mixing magical realism with sharp-edged comedy** in a context that copes with unfathomable tragedy in order to reveal the profoundly human cost of racial injustice” (Oakland Theatre Project, <https://oaklandtheaterproject.org/mojo>, 1).
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Writing in a Jazz Aesthetic

Beyond the Words

”My work is in the tradition of what I call the ‘jazz aesthetic,’ which acknowledges the characters’ various levels of reality. They have a triple consciousness: of the unborn, the living and dead” (Rahman, *Moon Marked and Touched by Sun*, 284).

Like Jazz

“...an African American art creation [composed] of virtuosity, improvisation, being present, listening, witnessing, expansion, and exploration of time, polyrhythms, non-linear forms, breath, synchronicity, and transcendence” (Jones, 15-16).

Not Your Grandmother’s Theatre – *no clapping, please*

”Truth telling, honesty, and shameless embodiment, I discovered, are integral to the theatrical jazz aesthetic” (Tift, 94).

The Elephant In the Boudoir

The character of **Charlie Chan** is meant to be a minstrel. Period.

The playwright has her reasons, and I respect those reasons.

(She's quite brilliant for this choice. A black woman reclaiming an invention of the white racist imagination? Well!)

Yet, in her playwright's notes, she challenges and encourages us to reach outside of the box and tinker with reality and fiction. In our production, we attempt to humanize this stock performer for a 21st century audience, who, we hope, understands that blackface (and other kinds of "faces") is offensive to the people of color.

Blackface Minstrelsy

- It was the most popular form of American entertainment of the 19th century.
 - Faces painted with burnt cork
 - **Mugging** – overexaggerated facial expressions
 - A caricature of black personhood
- **Thomas Dartmouth “Daddy” Rice (1808-1860)** – white northerner known as “the father of American minstrelsy”
- **Al Jolson (1886-1950)** – Lithuanian-American Jewish vaudeville singer, comedian, and actor
- **Bert Williams (1874-1922) and George Walker (1872-1911)** – popular African American vaudeville comedians



Charlie
Parker, Jr.
aka Yardbird
aka Bird

(1920-1955)



Bird (1988)

Directed by Clint Eastwood

Starring Forrest Whitaker (as Parker) and Diane Venora (as Chan)

A critical success but a commercial (box office) failure.

Presents an accurate portrait of the life and death of Charlie Parker, Jr. in nonsequential order. Chan Parker was a consultant on the project.



Resources

- Jones, Omi Osun Joni L. *Experiments in a Jazz Aesthetic: Art, Activism, Academia and The Austin Project*. University of Austin, 2010.
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- Mahone, Sydné. *Moon Marked and Touched by Sun*. New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1994.
- Eastwood, Clint, dir. *Bird*. Warner Brothers, 1988.
- Tift, Kristyl D. “African American Lesbian Identity in Performance.” Dissertation. University of Georgia, 2017.
- Page, Yolanda Williams, ed. “Aishah Rahman” (480-82). In *Encyclopedia of African American Women Writers*. Greenwood Press, 2007.