



INSURRECTION

HOLDING HISTORY

i'm just gon' jump. jump till i
Robert O'Hara touch the sky. these hands. they

ll i know but they ready. these
eet. they quick. you probably
n't understand bein' free n' all
A Play
but that's okay.

INSURRECTION:

· Holding History

Robert O'Hara

Theatre Communications Group

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Preface

by *Shelby Jiggetts-Tivony*

Salman Rushdie wrote of Dorothy Gale, the heroine of *The Wizard of Oz*, "... what she embodies with the purity of an archetype is the human dream of *leaving*, a dream at least as powerful as its countervailing dream of roots. At the heart of *The Wizard of Oz* is the great tension between these two dreams."

Ronald Porter, the Black, gay protagonist of *Insurrection: Holding History*, estranges himself from his working-class, southern family by seeking the shelter and anonymity of an academic environment in New York City. Scholarship is not so much a passion as it is protection from the threats of AIDS, poverty, racism and ultimately, intimacy. Through the course of the play, Ron's desire to hold history evolves into the awareness that history is large enough to hold him.

I am excited by the publication of *Insurrection* for a number of reasons. First, to welcome Robert O'Hara, a young playwright whose own voice has been liberated by the biting satirical, profound and celebratory work of George C. Wolfe as well as the epic, exuberant intelligence of the plays of Tony Kushner. In *Insurrection*, the gay fantasia on national themes and the colored museum of Black stereotypes collide and merge.

Second, we now have another opportunity to gaze at that peculiar institution that enslaved millions and whose legacy enslaves many of us still. In *Insurrection*, we are reintroduced to Nat Turner, the prophet, preacher, and some say madman and murderer, whose rebellion is still the stuff of historical

and literary revisionism. To invoke one of the most blood-drenched chapters in a people's struggle for freedom and add a "FULL-THROTTLE, NO-HOLDS-BARRED, 11:00, BROADWAY, SHOWSTOPPING, BRING DOWN THE HOUSE, PRODUCTION NUMBER, Chains and all" takes the kind of bodaciousness that is as liberating as it is initially shocking. But to know that we move toward a twenty-first-century American theatre with so much gumption and our collective sense of humor intact is a joy and a relief.

Finally, I just love this play! I know that my former colleagues at The Joseph Papp Public Theater/New York Shakespeare Festival share both my pleasure at being a part of its development and my hope that this is the first of many fine plays to come from Mr. O'Hara.

As the character Ron reconciles his need to leave with a deeper understanding of the roots that will forever ground and nourish him, we can collectively share the pain and catharsis of holding history.

Shelby Jiggetts-Tivony

Dramaturg, *Insurrection: Holding History*

The Joseph Papp Public Theater/New York Shakespeare Festival

December 1998

Acknowledgments

during the early part of 1994 as i sat in my bed after having my dead grandfather visit me in my dreams this play began to form itself. in that dream my grandfather, T.J. nicknamed Judge, whispered 3 words to me, “take. me. home.”

the following **acknowledgments** are for those who helped bring that dream to reality:

my mother, Lillie Ann, my grandmother Lizzie Bee and the rest of the O'Hara Family gave me a childhood so rich and insane that my imagination lives on in Overdrive.

the Cast and Crew of my MFA Thesis production, Richarda, Karamu, David, Duane, Heather (my wife), Edward, Benja, Spencer, Messeret, Nella, Tracey, Kaye, Colin, and Doey were there from the beginning making their way in the cold to a small dark basement in harlem every day for 4 weeks for no money no fame no glory but simply the love of the Theater. they are still my Foundation and Friends Forever.

George C. Wolfe, mentor and taskmaster, forced my Art and my Self to grow in leaps and bounds and provided me with my 1st. Artistic Home.

my 2nd Family at the Public including Rosemarie, Shirley, John, Carol, Brian, Tom, Donna and many many others on Lafayette Street made the World Premiere possible.

— Acknowledgments

Carey Perloff and my 3rd Family at ACT treated me like a king and provided me a room and stage to “let my spirits SPEAK.”

Gordon Davidson, Robert Egan, Oliver Mayer and the staff of the Mark Taper Forum helped an infant of a writer to grow feet and develop this play before any one else.

Charles Randolph-Wright and Timothy Douglas each brought a fierceness of talent and love of language to their productions which allowed me to SEE. safe in the thought that there was Something in the words i’d written.

Shelby Jiggetts-Tivony asked the difficult questions and gave me that much needed encouragement to push further and see the light at the end of the tunnel. the american theater needs you shelby, come back baby come back!

my professors and fellow students at Columbia University were committed to developing the Artist inside me.

the National Endowment for the Arts, Theatre Communications Group, Audrey Skirball-Kenis Theater Projects, the Sherwood Family and *Newsday* provided me with additional financial stability during the development of this play.

Prof. Doc Collins was the first to look me in the eye and say, “rob, you’re a writer . . .” i love you Doc.

Insurrection: Holding History is dedicated to the Memory of my Grandfather, T.J. O’Hara. as i grow older i wish even more that he were still here but i continue to Hold His Story as he Holds Mine.

INSURRECTION!

Holding History

the 4 productions below made this play what it is today.

Insurrection: Holding History was first performed in an Actor's Equity Association-approved Showcase production presented by The Oscar Hammerstein II Center for Theater Studies, School of the Arts, Columbia University, as Robert O'Hara's MFA Directing Thesis, April 1995. it was directed by Robert O'Hara. sets were designed by Doey Luethi, costumes by Kaye Voyce, lights by Colin D. Young. the dramaturg was Liz Engelman, general manager was Nella Vera and the stage manager was Tracey Mitchel.

the acting ensemble was as follows:

MUTHA WIT/MUTHA	Richarda Abrams
T.J.	Karamu Kush
NAT TURNER/OVA SEEA JONES	David Larrick Smith
RON	Duane Boutté
OCTAVIA/KATIE LYNN	Heather Simms
GERTHA/CLERK WIFE/MISTRESS MO'TEL	Benja Kay
REPORTER/COP/CLERK HUSBAND/	
BUCK NAKED/DETECTIVE	Edward Nattenberg
HAMMET	Spencer Barros
CLERK SON/IZZIE MAE	Messeret

a Workshop production presented by Center Theater Group/ Mark Taper Forum as part of their New Work Festival, December 1995. it was directed by Timothy Douglas. set consultant was Rachel Hauck, costume consultant was Maggie Morgan, lighting consultant was Michael Nevitt.

the acting ensemble was as follows:

MUTHA WIT/MUTHA	Juanita Jennings
T.J.	Gregory Wallace
NAT TURNER/OVA SEEA JONES	Ellis E. Williams
RON	Demitri Corbin
OCTAVIA/KATIE LYNN	Kimberleigh Aarn
GERTHA/CLERK WIFE/MISTRESS MO'TEL	Cleo King
REPORTER/COP/CLERK HUSBAND/	
BUCK NAKED/DETECTIVE	Edward Nattenberg
HAMMET	Robert Barry Fleming
CLERK SON/IZZIE MAE/SHERIFF	Regina Byrd Smith

the World Premiere was presented by The Joseph Papp Public Theater/New York Shakespeare Festival, George C. Wolfe, Producer, November 1996. it was directed by Robert O'Hara. sets were designed by James Schuette, costumes by Toni-Leslie James, lights by David Weiner, sound by Red Ramona, music composed by Zane Mark, choreographed by Ken Roberson, production dramaturg was Shelby Jiggetts-Tivony.

the acting ensemble was as follows:

MUTHA WIT/MUTHA	Vickilyn Reynolds
T.J.	Nathan Hinton
NAT TURNER/OVA SEEA JONES	Bruce Beatty
RON	Robert Barry Fleming
OCTAVIA/KATIE LYNN	Heather Simms
GERTHA/CLERK WIFE/MISTRESS MO'TEL	Ellen Cleghorne
REPORTER/COP/CLERK HUSBAND/	
BUCK NAKED/DETECTIVE	T.J. Kenneally
HAMMET	Jeremiah W. Birkett
CLERK SON/IZZIE MAE	Sybyl Walker

the West Coast Premiere was presented by the American Conservatory Theater, January 1998. it was directed by Charles Randolph-Wright. the sets were designed by Yael Pardess, costumes by Beaver Bauer, lights by Peter Maradudin, music by Edwin Hawkins, sound by Garth Hemphill.

the acting ensemble was as follows:

MUTHA WIT/MUTHA	Velina Brown
T.J.	L. Peter Callender
NAT TURNER/OVA SEEA JONES	Steven Anthony Jones
RON	Gregory Wallace
OCTAVIA/KATIE LYNN	Anika Noni Rose
GERTHA/CLERK WIFE/MISTRESS MO'TEL	Shona Tucker
REPORTER/COP/CLERK HUSBAND/	
BUCK NAKED/DETECTIVE	Marco Barricelli
HAMMET	Raphael Peacock
CLERK SON/IZZIE MAE	June A. Lomena

THE CHARACTERS

8 Negros n' 1 Cracker
Play All of the Following
Characters:

Ron

T.J.

Mutha Wit/Mutha

Gertha/Clerk Wife/Mistress Mo'tel

Octavia/Katie Lynn

Nat Turner/Ova Seea Jones

Clerk Son/Izzie Mae

Reporter/Cop/Clerk Husband/Buck Naked/Detective
Hammet

and Random Field Slaves

TIME

Now and Then

PLACE

Here and There

NOTE

All lines and actions denoted with an * should be performed
simultaneously

AUTHOR'S NOTE

this play should be done as if it were a Bullet through Time

Prologue

A BACKYARD

*RON READS a version of THE CONFESSIONS OF NAT
TURNER.*

next to RON is

*T.J. who is the GREAT-GREAT-GRANDFATHER, who is the SHINER,
who is the 189-year-old man, who has inhabited a wheelchair for the
last 100 years, who can move nothing on his body EXCEPT his left
eye and the middle toe of his right foot*

there is a THUD

it comes from OFFSTAGE

there is another

THUD

it is the bass line of music playing off

THUD

beat.

RON lifts a Pencil and makes a note in the BOOK

as he writes

*FAMILY & FRIENDS (Offstage): the ROOF the ROOF the
ROOF IS ON FIRE!!!!*

(Ron's Pencil breaks

he looks toward

THUD

he sighs

he rolls his eyes

he looks to T.J.

silence.

then

THUD

*he grabs his BOOKbag
inside is a portable CD player
THUD
he finds the CD his special CD placing it inside the player plac-
ing the headphones on his Head
THUD
as the CD plays
we hear
MUTHA WIT who is the ROOT, who gives voice to T.J.
she SINGS a lullaby
for RON
the CD drowns out the
THUD
but.
he feels something. different.
a
presence.
he removes his Headphones
he looks to T.J.
AS MUTHA WIT APPEARS
he doesn't see HER
he feels HER
RON listens to MUTHA WIT.
he allows her to
enter
she moves
closer
inside.
RON sees
NAT TURNER who is the INSURRECTIONIST, who is the
SLAVE, who is the PROPHET, who is the HATCHET
MURDERER; NAT FLEES into the dark safety of the
woods.
RON starts to follow NAT
but there
right
there*

HAMMET appears.

HAMMET who is NAT TURNER's right-hand man, who is the other SLAVE, who is a walking Beauty; HAMMET SEARCHES for NAT TURNER.

HAMMET stops he sees RON.

RON stops he sees HAMMET.

his Breath is taken away

a WHITE REPORTER enters the BackYard and approaches RON.

instantly

HAMMET escapes.

** not noticing the REPORTER, slowly RON goes back to the BOOK and T.J.)*

** FAMILY & FRIENDS (Offstage):* WORK OCTAVIA WORK. WORK THOSE BRAIDS. HEY!! WORK OCTAVIA WORK. WORK THOSE BRAIDS. HEY!! SIDE TA SIDE. UP N' DOWN. SIDE TA SIDE. UP N' DOWN. WORK GERTHA WORK. WORK GERTHA WORK. SHAKE IT MAKE SHO YOU DON'T BREAK IT SHAKE IT MAKE SHO YOU DON'T BREAK IT. FISHTAIL. FISHTAIL. FISHTAIL. HEY. WORK THAT CRACK BABY. WORK THAT CRACK MAMA. WORK THAT CRACK DADDY. *(Deep-voiced)* THE CRACK FAMILY. THE CRACK FAMILY HEY. ROACHES. ROACHES. ROACHES ON THE WALL-ALL WE DON'T NEED NO RAID LET THE MUTHERFUCKAS CRAWL-ALL. HEY PARTY OVA HEAH. PARTY OVA HEAH. PARTY OVA HEAH. OWWWW . . .

REPORTER: how does it feel to know that your Great-Great-Grandfather is still alive after all this time?

RON *(Laughing)*: you know, every year you never fail to ask the same questions. i mean . . . it feels good.

REPORTER: What about the reports that the Government wants to do some tests on Mr. T.J. to figure out if he's actually alive or just some dummy that you all got rigged up to get publicity every year?

RON (*Final*): . . . my grandfather is in wonderful health for a 189-year-old man

REPORTER: has he moved yet

RON: as you well know he can only move his left eye and his middle toe on his right foot.

REPORTER: how do you all know that Mr. T.J. is actually 189 years old and that his birthday is actually today I mean did any slave really know his date of birth in Africa didn't they go by the moons or something?

(*beat.*)

RON: he told me.

REPORTER: but isn't it true he hasn't spoken in this century?

RON: he shines.

REPORTER: could you explain what you mean when you say mr. T.J. "shines"? is there any voodoo involved here?

RON: heah you go wit yo' voodoo shit again
i don't mean ta be rude o' nuthin but—

FAMILY & FRIENDS (*Offstage*): IF YOU DON'T IF YOU
DON'T IF YOU FUCK YOU IF YOU DON'T IF YOU
DON'T WANNA PARTY TAKE YO' BLACK ASS
HOME!!! (2X)

(*another VISION appears of
NAT TURNER racing through the woods
TURNER huffs. He puffs.*)

* HEY!! RUFF-RUFF RUFF-RUFF BOW-WOW BOW-
WOW RUFF-RUFF RUFF-RUFF BOW-WOW BOW-
WOW . . .

(* NAT is frightened out of the woods by the BARKING.
HE surrenders himself to a JAIL CELL.
TURNER SUFFERS.
HE PRAYS.
RON turns to T.J.