"Having a whole lot of show going on": Diasporic Caribbean Theatre in Toronto

RIC KNOWLES, in conversation with ahdri zhina mandiela, Alison Sealy Smith, and Rhoma Spencer

The following conversation about Caribbean Canadian women's theatre took place on November 22, 2010 in Toronto at the invitation of Hyacinth Simpson, editor of *Macomere: Journal of the Association of Caribbean Women Writers and Scholars*. The conversation was transcribed by Cristina Naccarato, edited and annotated by Ric Knowles, and scheduled for publication in *Macomere*. Because the journal suspended publication the interview was never published. A short version of it appears here as the record of a significant historical moment.

Alison Sealy Smith is an award-winning actor and director, born in the Barbados in 1959. Active with a host of theatre companies in Canada since the 1980s, Alison was a founding member and first Artistic Director of Obsidian Theatre Company. She performed at the Stratford Festival from 1992-1994, and originated the role of Billie in Djanet Sears' *Harlem Duet* in 1997, for which she won a Dora award.

Rhoma Spencer is an actor, director, storyteller, and broadcast journalist who began her career in Trinidad, and holds degrees from the University of the West Indies and York University, Canada. Her company, Theatre Archipelago, seeks to present, promote and develop theatre from the Caribbean and its diaspora through new and existing works (blackincanada.com).

ahdri zhina mandiela is the founder and artistic director (1991-2013) of b current, and the driving force behind the rock.paper.sistahz festival. Best known for her work as a dub-poet, ahdri has gained world-wide acclaim for her books, music recordings, and theatre and dance productions. In 2006, she was awarded the George Luscombe Award for mentorship in theatre, and was named the number one theatre artist by *NOW Magazine* (playwrightscanada.com).

Ric Knowles: What was the scene like in Toronto for theatre practitioners from the Caribbean when you first started here?

ahdri zhina mandiela: I came into the scene in the seventies when Black Theatre Canada was the main Caribbean-focused theatre. There was also Theatre Fountainhead.[1] They endeavored to have seasons going for the artists, particularly young artists. Outside of that we had to think about how to get work, and what work we were going to have to create for ourselves.

Alison Sealy Smith: I joined the scene in '81. At that point there was Black Theatre Canada, but they wouldn't give me work because I didn't have enough experience. But Theatre Fountainhead was really coming into its own and I did a fair amount of work with them. It was around that time that we all started thinking, "what is *our* entry into this thing?" And we started to answer that in the early 80's with me and ahdri doing stuff at Bathurst [Street Theatre].

An interesting thing to talk about is how Canada's multicultural policy effected how it all worked. The first professional work I got was with Pelican Players in 1981, and that company was billed as Canada's first multicultural community theatre. So, instead of focusing on Caribbean theatre, the whole thing was, have one Italian, and one Greek, one Aboriginal person, one buddy from Jamaica, somebody from Barbados . . . That way you could access funding.[2] Multicultural policy was trickling down into the way that we actually made work.

Ric: That was the Multiculturalism Directorate, right? It wasn't arts funding.

Alison: No, it was all multicultural funding.

Rhoma Spencer: I came here to go to grad school to study directing at York. I didn't really figure out the industry until 2001, but even while at York I wanted to see what was happening in terms of Caribbean Theatre. I arrived in August 1999 and went to see my first Caribbean play—a touring show from Jamaica—in about October. I was appalled. I felt that the subject matter, and the treatment of women, was archaic. I felt I needed to make a difference while I was here. I didn't want Canadians to view that as the be-all and end-all of Caribbean theatre. I made a vow that when I finished grad school, the first thing I'd do was expose the Canadian audience to a play called *Jean and Dinah* [written by Tony Hall with Susan Sandiford and Rhoma Spencer]. I finished school in May/June, and by July I was able to bring that play from Trinidad. I wanted the Canadian audience to see the kind of theatre we were doing in the Caribbean, because what I saw here then certainly wasn't it. I wanted to make a difference, because I felt that when I left Trinidad in '99, I was at the top of my game and I wanted to see the kind of work that was happening, not only in Trinidad, but in the Caribbean, reflected here as well. We in the Caribbean are looking at our own theatre aesthetics.

Ric: Could you each talk about what you've contributed and what you've taken from that scene, and done with it in the years since you've arrived?

ahdri: I came as a poet, and I still like to call myself a poet. In all the mediums I've worked with, it's my poetry that's being displayed. Different kinds of poetic forms. That's what I brought to the scene, a way of dealing with language and animating language in storytelling. The plays that they're innovating with now, and the different ways that spoken word can be utilized in theatre, come from what I brought to the scene.

Ric: Absolutely. *dark diaspora . . . in rom (dub)* was huge when I first saw it in 1991. I had never seen anything like it.[3]

ahdri: Yeah, nobody had. I mean not even me. I didn't know necessarily what it was but I was working on it.

Ric: You brought poetry to the stage, but you brought movement too.

ahdri: Yes, because part of the whole imagistic language of dub theatre is movement-based. That came with me being a poet and having different mediums to integrate into theatre performance. I think that's what my influence continues to be, even as a director.

Ric: Is there an arc between *dark diaspora* and *who knew grannie* [2010]?

ahdri: Absolutely. *grannie* pushes the storytelling form that *dark diaspora* introduced. The storytelling arc was a different incorporation of how characters unfold in the narrative—very different from the kind of poetic articulation in *dark diaspora*, which was really a single-character piece. The multi-character nature of *grannie* really pushed the narrative form.

Ric: And what about—since this conversation is about *women's* Caribbean Canadian theatre—when a couple of years ago you let men into rock.paper.sistahz, which started [in 2002] as a Black woman's festival. Was that a conscious choice?

ahdri: It was. *dark diaspora* used Black women's language and narrative and I ended up developing Black women artists out of that. rock.paper.sistahz was just continuing that work; it was never intending to keep guys out. It was intended to focus on women, but not necessarily be a barrier. That guys wanted in was natural, and letting them in was also natural.

Ric: Alison, what about you? What have you brought to the scene?

Alison: I came in as an actor. I didn't come in with an agenda or a philosophy. So it was all about getting work and becoming a better actor. What that lead to was that, as a Caribbean woman, I ended up being the first in a lot of spaces that hadn't necessarily opened themselves up. It may have been unfortunate that I had as little philosophy as I did when I entered these mainstream spaces. Some of the stuff that we're talking about now is, "what is this Caribbean aesthetic?" and "what is a Caribbean style of acting?" And, all I can trust is that—because I know that I'm a Caribbean woman from the top of my head to the bottom of my feet, and when I go up on stage, all I have is me—somehow what was Caribbean found its way into whatever I was putting on stage. People may not have been aware of it, I may not have been aware of it, but my Olivia, in Stratford's *Twelfth Night* [in 1994], had to be an Olivia that they had never seen before. This was an Olivia that came out of my particular experience, which is Caribbean. When you aren't playing a particularly Caribbean figure, what is it that you bring? I think about this more now than I did then. I guess the norm would be to operate first in your own cultural sphere and then take it out, while for me it was the other way around. Where first I was playing in everybody's sphere, doing this feminist thing, Company of Sirens,[4] more social issue stuff with Ground Zero,[5] and then more mainstream (lots of Shakespeare), and then I came back. I made work like [Lisa Codrington's] *Cast Iron* and

[Austin Clarke's] *The Polished Hoe*. Those Caribbean things came after I had already done the other circuit. But I figured out what it is I brought from the Caribbean into the mainstream and what I brought out of the mainstream back in to this other work: I'm really interested in what I do with hybridity, how it informs who I am, and with the hybridization of forms.

ahdri: If you *had* gone to these places with a certain kind of philosophy or mandate, you wouldn't have got in.

Alison: I got in because I couldn't articulate it yet, but I embodied it. One of the things that I'm starting to talk about now, doing workshops in Barbados, and people are looking for what this aesthetic is, I keep saying, "we embody it." Open your mouth, get me? Fling your hand, get me? That is a Caribbean aesthetic. I cannot talk unless the hand does this. So, when you're looking for an aesthetic, I just say, "find it in yourself. Watch yourself."

The reason you have to get out of spaces like [The Stratford Festival] eventually is because they don't allow you to access everything that is you. That is the whole problem with colourblind casting: at no point did anybody know enough to ask me to access things that would have helped me in *Love's Labours Lost*. There are some final speeches in that play when the women are telling the men to "grow up," and I thought "shoot, if somebody had let me explore who I was, and this Black Caribbean woman was saying to this white Canadian man, 'you think this love thing is easy? Well wait 'til you take my Black ass home to your parents. You got some growing up to do!'" I could have dug in and given him all kinds of stuff. It lives inside, but I had to rely on the thing that leaked out because of who I am, rather than being asked to access it by someone who recognized what a treasure trove it is.

Rhoma: That's the essence of my approach, as a director and as an actor. What I bring to the space is theatre from the Caribbean and its diaspora. I'm bringing a particular style that has to do with understanding your cultural heritage, not just from Trinidad, or Jamaica, but the cultural heritage of the Caribbean space. In Trinidad we are blessed because the land that is so rich, with all of these various cultures intertwining. There is probably nowhere else in the world where you can go into a Chinese restaurant and get Indian food. That's what I grew up with. We eat out of each other's art, so that those cultures belong to me as well. If I'm working on a script and an image comes out that is, let's say, the Hindus' Divali, I embrace it as my culture as an Afro Trinidadian artist. In Canada, everything is compartmentalized. You're still allowed to celebrate your culture, but it's Italian here, Portuguese there, Ukrainian over there, and no one is allowed to intermingle. But our national theatre comes out of all our cultures.

ahdri: I'd like to challenge that. If you were here in Canada would you still be working with the same styles? I think we're forced to articulate in the ways we do because our reference here is mainstream. Canada has a whole lot of cultures mixed up, but what we mainly see are the white cultures and styles. You're talking about the Caribbean, and a sort of pan-Caribbean location. Here it's a mish-mash of white cultural styles.

Alison: But my whole thing is, I claim it. I claim Shakespeare. The beauty of being Caribbean

is that I'm allowed to claim it all, because it all belongs to me. I feel quite natural doing Shakespeare. It is now part of how I express myself. Divali is mine, all of the Chinese things are mine. All of them. French, Spanish, Caribbean . . . all belong to me and I think that we've translated that into our practice.

Ric: This is what you meant earlier by hybridity.

Allison: Yes. I believe that Caribbean people are the planet's first truly hybrid people.

ahdri: Well, there's a lot of hybrid peoples in the world. I think with Caribbean peoples, it's at a certain stage of creolization. It becomes almost a yardstick for hybridity. You can't discount the hybridity that's elsewhere, but it's a different kind. In Toronto we're looking at a different stage of hybridity. Even in the States there's a type of hybridity that we don't get to articulate, because they want to mask it, they want to put it in this one pot.

Ric: And what Alison said is important: claim it as opposed to be beaten up by it.

Alison: Yes, own it. Instead of feeling ashamed, thinking you come from this broken thing, decide instead that you come from many different things. You can call it "mongrel," or you could call it hybrid. One is a claiming and owning, and seeing that as a strength.

Rhoma: You asked something, ahdri, whether if had I been in Trinidad I would have been able to articulate it?

ahdri: Not able. No, would you feel the *need* to articulate it in the same way?

Rhoma: No, because back home, you just do it. Here I feel like you have to continuously explain.

ahdri: But I *am* at home, here, and I shouldn't be forced to forever be articulating in that way. For me [Canada] is home. I am claiming, and I am saying to all the folks out there who are asking me to identify myself and label my processes, "No." *who knew grannie* draws on all kinds of forms and styles. Every day in rehearsal the actors are saying, "damn, this is like Shakespeare, this is hard!" And I say, "That's what it is, it's what it is." Dub theatre incorporates so much—hybrid ideas and forms and everything.

Rhoma: I connect a lot to your work. I feel that your work is exactly what I came from and am continuing to do here. The first time I saw something that I felt really connected to after coming out of York was [naila belvett and debbie young's play] *yagayah*, which you directed, and I was like "thank god, all hope is not lost." Then after *yagayah* I felt like the only other person that was pushing those kinds of envelopes was d'bi.young.[anitafrika].

But I want to talk about this notion of a Caribbean aesthetic. We in the Caribbean are still trying to define what that is. I've studied theatre since 1987, and we had a class called Caribbean space. You would have an architect who would talk about understanding our space

and the architecture of our land—and I'm not just talking about buildings here. Our geography shapes who we are. Black people carry this notion that they're Irish, as Black as they are. We pulled from the Irish, the Scottish. We pull and we pull, but I think that the spine of all of this is the African. Caribbean identity is an African identity. Caribbean theatre is informed by African theatre. We do plays with lots of people; we do plays that have dance and music: that's African. In trying to understand what a Caribbean aesthetic is we have to look at African theatre. When I left grad school the first place I ended up was the AfriCan Theatre Ensemble.[6] That was the first time I was exposed to African theatre, but I felt at home. It was nothing different from what I was doing back in Trinidad. Having done two years of that, I wanted to do my Caribbean theatre work as well, so I moved on to form Theatre Archipelago.

Ric: You've talked about the Caribbean landscape shaping things and being shaped by Africa, but what happens when you come to Toronto and you've got a different landscape and different architecture?

Rhoma: The beauty about Toronto is that I feel more sense of being Caribbean in Toronto than I do back home. Back home, you're just Trinidadian. I feel that the Caribbean nation does not happen in the Caribbean. To understand the Caribbean nation is to work in the diaspora. Toronto, Birmingham, New York, London. That's where you'll find it.

Ric: Is there anything else about Toronto that plays into this? You're all working with people not just from the Caribbean but from all over the place.

ahdri: It's that whole multiplicity of cultures, spaces, identities, origins, and backgrounds that allows and forces us to take hold consciously of our Caribbean-ness. We have to do it with confidence and with real knowledge. And that's what makes it good. But the downside is that you're relegated to having to identify your background.

Ric: Who's your audience? Is it cross-cultural? Is it culturally specific?

Rhoma: For me, it's a specific audience. First African Canadian, people of Caribbean descent, and then the mainstream who's interested in another view of theatre. So it matters, not whether it's a Caribbean play, or maybe a play from Ethiopia; they're just interested in seeing another view of theatre.

ahdri: Are you saying this is the audience that you want, or is this what you focus on?

Rhoma: For me it's the audience that I get. I just want to do the work as a mainstream company. But that's what I get.

Ric: I've heard a lot of frustration from Philip Akin [Artistic Director of Obsidian Theatre[7]] saying that when he does a West-African play, he gets a West-African audience, and when he does a Caribbean play he'll get a Caribbean audience, but they don't cross over.

Rhoma: I've suffered with that in Theatre Archipelago. Doing a play from Jamaica, I'll find a lot of Jamaicans coming. Next year, from Trinidad, there'll be a lot from Trinidad. Those Jamaicans probably wouldn't come out.

Alison: That seems to run slightly counter to what we've said before—that, in this space, we're Caribbean, whereas at home we're Jamaican or Trinidadian and so on. Yet you have just said that in terms of your audiences it seems to . . . it gets very tribal.

ahdri: As artists we have that kind of Caribbean identity. But there are folks in all kinds of corners across the city. People don't think of themselves as Caribbean, they think of themselves as island nation identified, living in Canada.

Alison: I don't understand. That means that as a person, you're saying that I come here as a Barbadian negotiating the Canadian landscape, but as an artist, I am not a Barbadian artist, I am a Caribbean artist?

ahdri: I think your art influences your ordinary personage, and overruns it. I wouldn't say that you're a Barbadian yourself; no, with what your art itself has brought you, you are a Caribbean artist. You are a Caribbean person. Until you go "back home."

Rhoma: But on the outside it's still Jamaican. Those touring shows that we talked about that came here from Jamaica, it's Jamaicans who come out to see them, because Jamaica seems to have more appreciation for their art and culture than any other Caribbean island. They have a tradition of theatre dating back to the early nineteenth century.

Alison: But there's a big difference between that touring stuff and the stuff we did at Obsidian.

ahdri: Here's why: because those plays are *cultural* events. Works by [Trevor] Rhone and [Derek] Walcott and [Dennis] Scott, you know, all of those people, these are *artistic* events; they come from an artistic place. We treat them as art and art feeds culture and provides a community.

Alison: It's taken us a while to figure that out. When we started [at Obsidian] we thought that when I programmed Trevor Rhone's piece it was a way to get into a particular community and bring them out. But all that came out was the artistic audience. What are Caribbean cultural events here? Caribana maybe? Everything else is specific island-identified events. I'm even thinking of *The Polished Hoe*, which was such an absolute critical failure. But it was one of Obsidian's best houses.

Ric: So was that a cultural event as opposed to an artistic one?

Alison: I think it crossed borders. We were looking at an artistic icon a lot of different Caribbean folks know. It was by that artist [Austin Clarke].[8] And that artist and that partic-

ular work brought out a Bajan crowd. Masses came out. But it wasn't just Bajans, because there aren't enough Bajans in Toronto to fill the ninety percent houses that we had.

Rhoma: It crossed over and became a cultural event. And we have to remember that Austin is not just a Caribbean artist. Austin is a Canadian artist. That's where most of that house would come from.

Ric: Who were your biggest influences?

ahdri: The biggest influence in my life is Jamaican pantomime. I came to know this because of my attraction to African American work. What I like about African American work is the cultural referencing and diasporic-African influences. Vinette Carroll embodied the tradition and form and style of Jamaican pantomime much more than any other artist working in African-American tradition, as she was Caribbean born. I realized that I use that form in my work. The artists and the poets who have influenced me with respect to form, content, and style are Claude McKay, [Dennis] Scott, certainly Miss Lou [Louise Bennett], and a few of the dub poets from years back. I'm not going to discount the European canon either, Shakespeare, his style and text and language, that I grew up with and have integrated on all kinds of levels.

Ric: What about you Alison?

Alison: I know that my formative years as an actor were spent under Earl Warner in Barbados. I did four productions with him, and working work with him was hugely important in terms of who I am as an actor. I had started here, and then I went back to Barbados and worked for a few years, and then I came back up. After that, ahdri and Djanet [Sears] very much influenced what I did. ahdri, even before I left to go to Stratford, in '84. And from '97 we were doing the Africanadian Playwrights Festival,[9] next thing you know there was Obsidian. So as a director and actor actually, it was ahdri and Djanet.

Ric: Are there particular actors' work that you admire?

Alison: Lots of them, but I have no way of articulating how they influence me . . .

ahdri: What about how you influence them?

Alison: There's a guy at home who is working on this Anansi methodology of acting and I've started working with him. There's something about the whole Anansi thing that I find really interesting, both in terms of his tricksterism and his adaptability. I think that's a facet of Caribbean-ness. I've learned a certain discipline from up here but there's a different kind of discipline at home. Improv is much more a part of it. I also have that Caribbean quality of adaptability.

ahdri: I think you've had that sensibility whether you're conscious of it or not. A lot of the

early work we did, when we didn't even need to have scripts, it was that.

Rhoma: That's how it worked before I came here, because we don't have many playwrights. We tend to make plays through collective creation. All I ever knew was improvisation.

Rhoma: There's something that Tony Hall calls the Jouvay Popular Theatre Process, which he talks about as the post-emancipation way of seeing and making art. The fact that we are here today as African people means that we were able to survive the torture of slavery, and we were able to survive it because we were able to adapt. I call it the chameleon phenomenon

Ric: Rhoma, we haven't talked about your influences yet.

Rhoma: My influences in terms of artists will be Rawle Gibbons, Earl Warner, Hank Djon, Tony Hall. In terms of what I grew up with, there's something called "Best Village" in Trinidad and Tobago. It was a competition founded by the first prime Minster, Dr. Eric Williams. Different villages would compete for the prime minister's trophy. In this competition, there's the folk theatre category. You had to do a folk skit or a carnival skit and then a general skit on everyday life. These were stories told and directed by the average villager. As years went by, it started to get better and better. The government would give scholarships to study at NYU, and the school of drama and the school of dance in Jamaica. Of course when they came back, their work was better. I started off with Best Village. In 1980 I joined a group called Barataria Community Council that was managed by the village council and I came in as an actor and a singer. And that "school of theatre" still remains in the work that I do. It's all about using your folk and cultural heritage to tell stories. That was a big influence. Out of that I got an audition to do a play called *Minty Alley*, by C.L.R. James, and that was my entry into legitimate theatre. After that it was works by Errol Hill, Derek Walcott, Bertolt Brecht.

Then Trinidad and Tobago decided that they wanted to have a national theatre company and I was one of the actors. The first play we did was *Man Better Man*, by Errol Hill. The next year we did *I, Lawah* by Rawle Gibbons. And I went on to study at the UWI Creative Centre in Trinidad, and had Rawle Gibbons as one of my teachers, who no doubt was influenced by the Jamaican, Dennis Scott. The Barbadian, Earl Warner, and Hank Jean, who's from Suriname, and Trinidadians Lester Efebo Wilkinson, Ronnie Amoroso, and Tony Hall have all inspired me. So basically, my influences were my teachers and directors.

Ric: Who do you think you've influenced?

Alison: I guess mine has something to do with the mainstream. It may have something to do with what I was talking about when I first started articulating what Obsidian was, the idea that we were going to plant ourselves right in the middle of this Canadian mosaic, that we were not going to be relegated to the exotic fringes.

Ric: One thing that that does, that Obsidian does, is create the identity category of "African Canadian." It's attempting to be broader than any particular community . . . I wonder if

that's a good thing or bad thing?

ahdri: I think it has to be good, because we have to identify. We have to keep identifying in the "wider Canadian sphere." Otherwise we're relegated to margins.

Alison: What about Obsidian's production of [Lynn Nottage's] *Intimate Apparel*? It's a good show, successful in terms of both critical and audience response but it's an American piece … if we're talking about Caribbean, how is it that—

ahdri: We're not, we're talking about Canadian.

Alison: Let me play devil's advocate here . . . If we're talking about African Canadian theatre, because of the practitioners it should smell more Caribbean than American, shouldn't it? It should not look like American theatre, should it? *Intimate Apparel* is good writing, and it's selling, but is it African Canadian? What about Djanet's play? What about *Harlem Duet*? What is it about the style or form that made that African Canadian vs a Black American piece?

ahdri: Well first of all, looking at the creator of the piece and where the creation comes from. There's no way that "Canada" as a character would be in that piece if it wasn't a Canadian piece.

Alison: I know the Black/white thing is an American way of looking at things. I'm talking about the content. It's not just that it's at the corner of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Blvds, it's also the way that we look at skin colour. Skin is such a big deal for us in the Caribbean but it's not just a Black/white thing. That binary way of looking at things in the play, that's American.

ahdri: I am still back to the creator and the creation and the way we embed our voices in the pieces we create. We put our lives and our identities in there. I think *Harlem Duet* very much speaks to Djanet's experience and Djanet is African Canadian.

Ric: A more interesting question for me isn't whether it's African Canadian. It's how Obsidian, or *Harlem Duet*, or whatever, *constitutes* African Canadian-*ness*. Part of what they're doing, you're doing, is defining that intercultural group that is called "African Canadian." What *is* that? What does all of your work do to perform into being the community that's called African Canadian?

ahdri: I think part of the issue is how much of the Caribbean-ness gets into play and how much it gets considered and gets translated to the audience. When I look at new artists, and when I look at who I influence, they still have Caribbean sensibilities and want to play with Caribbean content and form. Not that they don't want to play out in the field, with the *Intimate Apparel*s and all the African American stuff as well, but they still have—

Alison: Your kids, do they have a Caribbean sensibility too?

ahdri: Oh yes, they do! But it's a Canadian sensibility that's heavily influenced by artists of Caribbean origin—both living and ancestral folks, contemporary and old time. Marley, for instance. And I claim it! I claim it all. And they work off of that, and when they want to tell their from-a-Canadian-place stories, they have to look at the Caribbean-ness that they've learned. It gets embedded in their work. That's why I won't get trampled by *Intimate Apparel* overshadowing the Caribbean-ness. We still embody our Caribbean-ness and people can't refuse embodiment.

Alison: That's why I'm thinking [American playwright Lorraine Hansberry's 1959 play] *A Raisin in the Sun* is resonating the way it is [in the Soulpepper Theatre production]. Even though it's as old as it is, it's resonating because of the people on stage. I am not a Black American. The "mama" I play may have an American southern accent but who I am has come through. But I won't ever discount the influence of African American in the whole diasporic identity . . .

ahdri: It's a far-reaching influence. I deliberately created a training program at *b current,* rAiz'n the sun, because of African American influence, and young people are going to draw closer to that identity than if I'd named it for Caribbean stuff that they don't know. But there's still all the Caribbean embodiment and teachings that they get. If people come into a wider Black theatre, and they come to see African American theatre like *Intimate Apparel*, that's fine by me. All I ask is that they don't think that that's all there is. It's up to us with our myriad of voices to make sure that they don't.

Ric: Rhoma, you've had an influence partly by just doing shows from the Caribbean. You've also produced new shows.

Rhoma: Yeah, I'm interested in new work by people writing and speaking with a Caribbean sensibility. People I have influenced? I really don't know. I remember when I was doing [Tony Hall's] *Twilight Café* and having to cast David Collins in it. He wasn't really my first choice. I wasn't sure that he could have connected to a Caribbean man because he was so African Canadian. Because of the work that I had to do with him to get to that place, and what came out of it, I would have to say that as a director I helped him through the process. The only way I could have done that is by continuously giving him images to work with.

ahdri: Even your work as an actor. You don't think you've influenced people? On the level of who you are, how you talk? Bringing that as an actor into a variety of work, even the one-woman stuff you've done, I see actors looking at that and saying "that means that I can do this, and this, and that."

Ric: It's permission.

ahdri: Yes!
Alison: I know with me it was about possibilities. As an actor I probably influenced main-stream audiences' reaction to people of colour on stage. In Stratford, because I was in a lead-

ing role they used to put me out there a lot as part of talkback sessions. But just the fact that I was there meant that I no longer had to justify myself. During one of the Q&As this woman jumped up and quite indignantly asked, "what are we going to see next? Asians in Elsinore?" Before I could even say a word everybody in the room turned on her: "What are you talking about? Couldn't you see that performance?" I just sat there and thought, "sometimes your presence on the stage is all that you need."

ahdri: This is what we were talking about. You don't need [vocal] articulation, because that articulating, often times, is a stumbling block.

Alison: We haven't yet talked about the whole female thing. This is about women now. How did that influence what we did? Was that just embodiment again? We talked about culture, we talked about race; where does gender come in? We've noticed that rock.paper.sistahz has sistahz in the title.

ahdri: I think there are two things. One: men aren't all that encouraged in this context to do art. In the Caribbean, not so, but when you come here, you're a breadwinner. Secondly, women are less intimidating when you start to go into the mainstream. We get in quicker. Because, we're women and there's less intimidation.

Ric: The kind of work you do, ahdri, is women-centric, and it seems like a lot of the folks you've influenced are conscious of doing women-centric work.

ahdri: I've never consciously made that choice.

Alison: What's rock.paper.sistahz? It wasn't a conscious way to look at women's work?

ahdri: That was different. Because rock.paper.sistahz was never about me, it was about the folks out there who needed work. But I think, seriously, outside of our festival—I lie. *dark diaspora* was definitively women-centered. It was.

Alison: When I think of you, I think of women-centered work. And I think Caribbean.

Rhoma: I don't like to compartmentalize my work and say that it's only women's theatre. In the Caribbean, the men are the ones who take on the role of director. A lot of the plays are written with a lot of men in them. Here in Canada I'm allowed to direct. Back in the Caribbean, theatre seemed to be a man's space, and I find that happens here in the mainstream theatre, the artistic directors are men, the plays are written by men.

Alison: When I came up it was slightly different. Earl Warner was the thing in Barbados in the 80s, but he wouldn't have gotten anything done if it weren't for women who were actually making things happen. Men talk about it a lot, and they write, but there were women actually producing stuff. So when I came up it was very balanced because everything was about Earl. The aesthetic was Earl's. The art was Earl's . . .

Rhoma: . . . but the person producing it was a woman. But I still don't see my work as specifically working from a women's theatre space. It just so happened that I came out of the rock.paper.sistahz festival. That's where Theatre Archipelago was formed [in 2004], with a play called *Mad Miss/Just Jazz* (2005) with Honor Ford-Smith and myself. Honor was the mind behind Sistren theatre in Jamaica, which was like the bastard women's theatre in the Caribbean. So, because we were two women, the first work that we did was two women's pieces. The following year was two women again with *Fallen Angel and the Devil Concubine* (2006). The following year it was [Tony Hall's] *Twilight Café (The Last Breakfast)* (2007). Then 2009 was [Edwige Jean-Pierre's] *Our Lady of Spills*. Again, two women.

ahdri: Might I bring up the fallout of the feminist movement from the '70s? It's certainly in the work that we did in the earlier years. Part of the reason for the predominance of women is that we were called into different kinds of places, schools, shelters—because there was feminism in the air.

Alison: I owe my career to women. My very first job was given to me by Robin Endres, who founded Pelican Players, then it was Company of Sirens and Cynthia Grant, then it was Maja Ardal who allowed me my first mainstage acting and directing gigs at YTP [Young People's Theatre], and then after that, the only reason I got to Stratford was because of Marti Maraden. She invited me over to her house and gave me some pointers before securing me an audition in front of David William, and she of course was the first woman to direct on the Festival Stage. So I owe my career to the fact that there were women willing to take risks, including, of course, ahdri and Djanet.

ahdri: For me the focus on women just happened to come out of *dark diaspora*. Certainly rock.paper.sistahz was women, because of the people who were associated with the company. It was really who was in the community, who was in the networking, who needed to be showcased.

Ric: I don't think you can get away with it, I think your work is pretty deeply centered around women.

ahdri (*laughing*)**:** I can't deny it.

Ric: I too am interested in tracing this back to the feminist movement in the '70's, which accomplished a lot but also tended to be about and for white women. But then the Black feminist, or womanist movement—

ahdri: I came to theatre as a celebrated poet within the Black feminist movement. I had to fight to be invited into white feminist spaces, and that wasn't always easy. Most of the time mine was a token position. The idea was inclusion, but I don't think that if I wasn't the only Black director around I would have had the same kind of consideration. Even now, I take umbrage at the fact that I am continuously called in as a Black director to direct a Black story or Shakespeare in the Park, because they want a Black director to do that particular

production. The only piece that I have directed in Toronto that is not "Black" is *Scratch*, Charlotte [Corbeil-Coleman]'s piece. I appreciate that coming to me because I know why, specifically—because of my work with young artists. It's not that I resent being called in as a Black director; I resent that being the only time I'm called in.

Ric: I have one more question, from Rhoma: "Is it appropriate or even possible for Caribbean Canadians' work to be measured against either mainstream productions of Canadian plays or against productions of plays from the European canon?"

Alison: I say yeah, there should be measuring, but the measuring has to include Caribbean vocabulary and ideas, by people that are knowledgeable about the cultural content and form.

Rhoma: Do you think the reviewers know that?

ahdri: They don't care! That's why it's skewed right now. The reviewers that are out there shouldn't be reviewing our work. The review pool should have people who know shit.

Rhoma: My question came from a review of Tony Hall's *Twilight Café* that says. "*Twilight Café* deserves high praise for its daring depiction of abuse through a cultural lens." My argument with this is: what is this "cultural lens?"

Alison: If Ric Knowles writes a play about domestic abuse, chances are he's going to use his own gender lens, his own cultural lens, his own generational lens, all of us would. He would talk domestic abuse from a different view than a 17-year-old would. And then he would have to *say* that he sees it through a generational lens. It was definitely a particular topic seen through a specific cultural lens.

Ric: I agree, but what I think Rhoma's raising is the fact that if I wrote that play, that reviewer would not say that I saw it through a cultural lens.

Rhoma: Why I felt so strongly about it is that if it was written by George Walker it would be seen as valid, not seen through a cultural lens.

Alison: No, they wouldn't say Walker *has* a culture, per se. They won't say that, but it is, in fact, through a white cultural lens.

ahdri: Could we talk about casting?

Alison: Has "non-traditional casting" changed anything? When I played Olivia in *Twelfth Night* at Stratford that wasn't non-traditional casting, that was colourblind casting, and to me there's a difference. With colourblind casting you're under no obligation to take into account the person's culture, race, nothing. But non-traditional casting carries with it an obligation to not do things traditionally, to take into account the race, ethnicity, gender, of the person you cast.

ahdri: I disagree. Non-traditional casting is not, was not, and is still not functioning like that. It does not come with that responsibility at all. I think how non-traditional casting has worked is you bring a coloured person into the room and there's the look, there's the feel of that person, and it doesn't necessarily influence the story telling. It doesn't change the story. I'm not a proponent of non-traditional casting, because it's about visuals. It's about marketing. Here's my thing: when they cast coloured folks in these dead white stories, they're still not marketing it for the coloured folks. It's for their regular audience. Doing this one Black play, or setting these Black actors in these specific roles in a non-traditional way to reach a quota—who you want to impress can vary, whether it's funding bodies or your preferred audience, or even a new audience that you want—it's always about filling some perceived quota. I'm tired of being part of a quota.

I also want to see other plays! That's the thing! Plays that are not from an all-white perspective. I want to see those. Caribbean theatre, or Black Canadian theatre, or . . . And artistic experiences aren't always social or cultural "events"; artistic experiences lift us out of our everyday, for a moment, a few minutes, or an hour or two.

Alison: We've come back to where we started, with the difference between an artistic event and a cultural event. I'll take that and file it away because it explained something to me that I have had some trouble explaining to myself. So, while some of these Jamaican touring things are not always very good theatre, you want that experience of your own people celebrating, you get your hairdo, your good shoes, and all of that.

Rhoma: And also, to behave in a sort of way when they go to those shows as well. They can talk back, and that in itself is another theatre. You're talking back to the performers on stage and you're engaging them. They don't feel like they can do that if they go to Canadian Stage.

ahdri: I think it needs to be interactive. We as artists have the responsibility of making it interactive. And if we are expecting audiences to talk back, then we have to take that into account.

Alison: You can sit backstage and know you have Black people there, because there's all kinds of laughter in inappropriate places. And, as a Black actor, you just interface with it in a slightly different way.

Rhoma: To us there's another theatre within the audience. The Caribbean audience reminds me of the ancient Roman Theatre.

ahdri: That to me is a Caribbean aesthetic. Not that it doesn't have a place in other cultures, but that's part of our Caribbean aesthetic. Having a whole lot of show going on.

Notes

1 Black Theatre Canada was founded in Toronto by Vera Cudjoe in 1973, and it remained in operation until 1988, producing plays by Leo Bibb, Daniel Caudeiron, Linda Evans, Bobby Gishay, Amah

Harris, Mustapha Matura, Trevor Rhone, Peter Robinson, and Roderick Walcott. Theatre Fountainhead was founded in 1974 by Jeff Henry, with the aim of developing Black artists. It closed in 1990, having produced plays by Samuel Beckett, Hector Bunyan, Athol Fugard, Linda Ghann, Jeff Henry, Barrie Keefe, Richardo Keens-Douglas, Errol Sitahel, and Wole Soyinka.

2 Although the Canadian Multiculturalism Act did not come into effect until 1988, multiculturalism was first introduced in a 1971 "white paper" titled "Multiculturalism Within a Bilingual Framework," and officially entrenched in the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms in 1982, where it focused on "preserving the cultural heritage" of people of diverse ethnicities. This translated into the funding of "multicultural" activities through the federal Multiculturalism Directorate, while "mainstream" theatre and other arts practices were funded through arts councils. The effect was to construct Euro-American activity as art to be developed, and "ethnic" arts practice as folklore to be preserved. The Multiculturalism Directorate was terminated in 1991, when it was replaced by the Department of Multiculturalism and Citizenship, which was in turn split in 1993 between the Department of Canadian Heritage and the Department of Citizenship and Immigration.

3 *dark diaspora . . . in rom (dub)* was created by ahdri zhina mandiela. It had a workshop production at the Toronto Fringe Festival in 1991, and then was the first play produced by b current in 1992 at BeaverHall Artists Coop Gallery in Toronto. It was published by Sister Vision Press.

4 The Company of Sirens was founded in 1986 by Cynthia Grant as a grass-roots social-interventionist feminist company, working with educational, labour, and activist organizations.

5 Ground Zero Productions is a popular theatre company founded by Don Bouzek in Toronto in 1988 to perform social intervention theatre in union halls, at conventions, and in other venues. It has since relocated to Edmonton.

6 AfriCan Theatre Ensemble was founded in 1998 by Modupe Oloagun with a mission to make African Theatre accessible to Canadians. It has staged productions by Ola Rotimi, Zakes Mda, Ama Ata Aidoo, Wole Soyinka, Donald Carr, Femi Osofisan, Gcina Mlophe, and Efua Sutherland.

7 Obisidian Theatre Company was founded in February 2000 by Awaovieyi Agie, Ardon Bess, David Collins, Roy Lewis, Yanna McIntosh, Diane Roberts, Kim Roberts, Sandi Ross, Djanet Sears, Satori Shakoor, Tricia Williams, Alison Sealy-Smith, and Philip Akin. Its mandate is to produce plays, to develop playwrights, to train emerging theatre professionals, and to explore, develop, and produce the Black voice. Obsidian has produced plays by George Boyd, Austin Clarke, Lisa Codrington, Wesley Enoch, Marcia Johnson, ahdri zhina mandiela, Lynn Nottage, Dael Orlandersmith, Joseph Jomo Pierre, Trevor Rhone, Djanet Sears, William Shakespeare, Colleen Wagner, and August Wilson. Its first Artistic Director was Alison Sealy Smith.

8 *The Polished Hoe* was adapted by Alison Sealy Smith and Colin Taylor from the novel by Austin Clarke.

9 The AfriCanadian Playwrights Festival was a tri-annual gathering in Toronto of Canadian and international theatre artists of African descent designed to celebrate African Canadian playwrights and their plays. It was founded in 1997 by Djanet Sears and was held on three occasions.