



Tanya Barfield

Voices from the Past

An interview with the playwright

BY SARAH HART

SARAH HART: What was your impulse in writing *Blue Door*? Did you have a story you wanted to tell?

TANYA BARFIELD: I started with the history. The character of Simon spoke to me first. I was moved by the myriad oral histories that I'd read. I wrote reams of material that never made it into the play. Then I thought, well, in order for this to be a play, Simon must have someone who needs to hear his story. That's how the character

of Lewis was formed—and I find the issues Lewis faces very compelling. I feel middle-class blacks are under-represented on the stage and screen.

How did you start your research?

I read a lot of the WPA [Works Progress Administration] interviews. There's recorded music from the period, the Alan Lomax collection. There are oral histories online. I think I read just about every book on slavery that's ever been written. Then I became interested in the dilemmas facing blacks during Reconstruction (that in many ways were much more complicated than slavery). I read about chain gangs and early Jim Crow laws. I also read a lot of folktales. The humor that comes from the Jesse character and the parable-like stories that he tells were inspired by black folktales.

You wrote the songs. Do you have a musical background?

None. Well, my father was an amateur jazz musician, but I'm not particularly musical. I did a lot of musical research until I felt I could write songs that were authentic to each period. The Yoruba song was tricky, because I don't speak Yoruba. My dramaturg at Sundance, Chris Sumption, said, "Well, I'll order you a Yoruba dictionary online and we'll have it FedExed." And it came, but it was only Yoruba to English—no English to Yoruba. So I literally read every page of the dictionary to look for the words that I wanted. Then when I was at South Coast, the director, Leah Gardiner, had a friend who spoke

Yoruba and he was willing to look at it and correct the grammar and stuff like that.

Where did you come across the image of the blue door?

I wrote the book for a children's musical about a young boy who escapes from slavery and joins the first black regiment in the Union army. That was my first foray into historical plays. I learned a lot about Gullah beliefs from writing that play, but since it's a children's play, you can't put in everything you'd like to. The Gullah were an isolated culture on the Sea Islands, off the coast of South Carolina and Georgia. There were problems with mosquitoes and other pestilence that the white slave masters didn't want to expose themselves to. So the isolated slaves were allowed to keep much of their indigenous culture that mainland slaves could not. That culture is still alive today. It's a link between Africa and America. There's a belief in Gullah culture that if you paint your door blue, you keep away the evil spirits, which are called haints. I always felt that the haints—which are described like ghosts—were the white slave masters or KKK.

Then we started rehearsal. Leigh Silverman, our director at Playwrights Horizons, had visited Israel and had gone to this spiritual city Safed, where kabbalah originated. Many of the doors are painted blue there for a similar reason. When I visited India, in Jodhpur, which they call the blue city, all the doors are painted blue for protective purposes. I've heard of another such city in Tunisia. It seems that cultures tend to share certain mythologies.

Did you give yourself an education in mathematics?

I did. That was the most difficult research of all. When I was in high school my mother made me take advanced math and physics, even though I was hopelessly bad at both of them. But I think taking those classes formed a curiosity or an inkling that I didn't realize at the time. I read a lot about studies of time. And I had different mathematicians look the play over because I really wanted to make sure that what Lewis talks about was accurate, credible. I had Lewis teaching the Philosophy of Mathematics, which I thought I made up, and then I asked one of these mathematicians if there's really such a thing as philosophy of math and he said, "Absolutely."

ABOUT THE PLAYWRIGHT Tanya Barfield is the author of *121° West*, *The Quick*, *Dent*, *The Houdini Act* and *Pecan Tan*. The short plays she has had produced are: *Medallion* (Women's Project/Antigone Project), *Foul Play* (Royal Court Theatre, Cultural Center Bank of Brazil), *The Wolves* (Guthrie Theater Lab) and *Wanting North* (Echo Theatre and Guthrie Theater Lab, Best 10-Minute Plays of 2003). She has workshopped her plays at New York Stage and Film and the Sundance Theatre Lab. Barfield was a recipient of the 2003 Helen Merrill Award for Emerging Playwrights, a 2005 Honorable Mention for the Kesselring Prize for Drama, a 2006 Lark Play Development/NYSCLA grant, and she has twice been a finalist for the Princess Grace Award. *Blue Door* was commissioned by Playwrights Horizons. Barfield has also been commissioned by the Mark Taper Forum, South Coast Repertory and Geva Theatre Center. She is a graduate of the Juilliard Playwriting Program and a member of New Dramatists.

ABOUT THE PLAY The world premiere of *Blue Door* was produced on April 23, 2006, by South Coast Repertory in Costa Mesa, Calif. (David Emmes, producing artistic director; Martin Benson, artistic director; Paula Tomei, managing director). The production was directed by Leah C. Gardiner, with scenic design by Dustin O'Neill, lighting design by Lonnie Rafael Alcaraz, costume design by Naila Aladdin Sanders and sound design by Jill BC Du Boff; the dramaturg was John Gloré and the stage manager was Randall K. Lum. The cast included Reg E. Cathey as Lewis and Larry Gilliard Jr. as Simon, Rex and Jesse. *Blue Door* received its New York premiere on Sept. 18, 2006, at Playwrights Horizons (Tim Sanford, artistic director; Leslie Marcus, managing director; William Russo, general manager). The production was directed by Leigh Silverman, with scenic design by Narelle Sissons, lighting design by



SOUTH COAST REPERTORY / HENRI DI ROCOCO

Larry Gilliard Jr. as
Simon, Jesse and Rex



PLAYWRIGHTS HORIZONS / JOAN MARCUS

Reg E. Cathey
as Lewis



PLAYWRIGHTS HORIZONS / JOAN MARCUS

André Holland as Simon,
Jesse and Rex

This play is about legacy, and Lewis has no son or daughter. Did you see him as an end point?

I saw him as an end point because there's an immediacy and an urgency for him to have to look back. And if he had a child, there could be the hope that that child would look back. Rex says several times in the play that ancestors have to be remembered because the dead only truly die when they die in memory. If they remain alive in the memory of the living, there's some part of them that never dies.

How did you choose the Million Man March as the catalyst for Lewis's wife leaving him?

I was talking to various black men and there were a lot of divergent opinions about the Million Man March. Some were very positive and some weren't so positive—vast differences in how people felt about it that I didn't realize at the time. It seemed believable to me that Lewis would feel that way—and also, it seemed like a funny starting point.

One of the most striking things about Lewis as a character and about the play is the humor.

Humor is so important in the black community. Humor and songs have both been major coping mechanisms for oppression. It was important to me that that was represented. I never knew that I had a funny bone. My parents have always said, "You're so serious." But when I studied with Chris Durang [at Juilliard], he would always laugh at what I wrote. I began to bring more comedy into my writing.

Did you plan to grow up and be a writer?

I started out wanting to be an actor—mostly because I had no idea living playwrights existed. I came from a non-theatrical family and I thought all plays were written by dead people. I was at NYU undergrad for acting, then I did solo performance, which was how I started writing. Leigh Silverman

workshopped my first play with me, and she said, "Why don't you apply to Juilliard?"

Who are some of your influences as a playwright?

Oh, that's such a hard question. I think that I am inspired by productions. When thinking about *Blue Door*, three plays come to mind: Athol Fugard's *Blood Knot*, then [Michael Frayn's] *Copenhagen*, then the recent production of [Lee Blessing's] *Going to St. Ives* at Primary Stages. Though I'd already written *Blue Door* when I saw *St. Ives*, I felt encouraged by it. I admire my contemporaries Lynn Nottage and Kia Corthron. I still think about a production of [Maria Irene] Fornes's *Mud* directed by Kate Whoriskey when we were at NYU.

What about audience? Rex asks Lewis about his audience.

Lewis's dilemma—which was really another inspiration for the play—is W.E.B. Du Bois's comment about otherness—always looking at yourself through the eyes of the other. That's what's happening to Lewis. He's always looking at himself through the eyes of white people. There's the inside joke about most theatres having more white subscribers than black, but that's just the wink-wink. Hopefully if the play were produced a number of years from now, that part of the joke wouldn't land.

The final nudge for his night of reckoning comes from his wife, who is a white woman.

The final nudge comes from his wife, but the entry to the journey of this night comes from [his brother] Rex. And the catalyst for his breakdown is both his father and his student Leroy. I guess you could quibble over what triggers it. Lewis has this line, "A constellation of moments." In the play, all time—and this is where the math comes in—is happening simultaneously.

Mary Louise Geiger, costume design by Toni-Leslie James and sound design by Ken Travis; original music was composed and arranged by Daryl Waters and the stage manager was Amy McCraney. The cast included Reg E. Cathey as Lewis and André Holland as Simon, Rex and Jesse. *Blue Door* will receive additional productions in 2007 at Seattle Repertory Theatre and Berkeley Repertory Theatre.

Blue Door, copyright © 2006 by Tanya Barfield. All inquiries regarding rights should be addressed to Carl Mulert at the Gersh Agency, 41 Madison Avenue, 33rd Floor, New York, NY 10011. Professionals and amateurs are hereby warned that performances of *Blue Door* are subject to a royalty. It is fully protected under the copyright laws of the United States of America, and of all countries covered by the International Copyright union (including the Dominion of Canada and the rest of the British Commonwealth), and of all countries covered by the Pan-American Copyright Convention and the Universal Copyright Convention, and of all countries with which the United States has reciprocal copyright relations. All rights, including professional, amateur, motion picture, recitation, lecturing, public reading, radio broadcasting, television, video or sound taping, all other forms of mechanical or electronic reproductions, such as information storage and retrieval systems and photocopying, and the rights of translation into foreign languages, are strictly reserved. Particular emphasis is laid upon the question of readings, permission for which must be secured in writing.

Excerpts: W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, Penguin Books, New York, 1996; Emily Dickinson, "Morning," number 1197, *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, Little, Brown and Company, New York, 1960.