



GO FORTH

Kaneza Schaal



There was a moment in the 1960s when the public housing erected along the East coast from New York to North Carolina included purpose-built theaters, places for performance. Since then, these spaces have been repurposed as day-care centers and “community rooms” that often remain underused. This reflects a story told in administrative offices or at community board meetings, an old lie that people who work hard, people who are under economic or social duress, those, say, who perform “essential work” or manual labor, don’t value art. That someone on public assistance has no need for the ritual, responsiveness, or collective storytelling afforded by the theater, or that somehow day care and community rooms are oppositional to art spaces. The fervor in the arts sector which yields an endless stream of new buildings without investing in programming and operations mirrors the history of these performance spaces created within state-supported housing.

At its best, theater is part of a functioning democracy and a model for participatory society. In the wake of Covid-19, how we gather collectively and experience that collectivity is shifting. Our understanding and use of local space are being invigorated, from jua kali workers in Kenya doing metalwork in the open air and sharing not only their products but the process with the community, to Flexn dancers in New York City moving their battles from basements into parks, to streets in Ho Chi Minh City flooded with folding chairs where youth music recitals are held for family members.

And yet, as the theater industry begins to address the new challenges posed to communal gathering, people are applying their old strategies to the problem. Already there is tittering about how to augment the architecture of theater venues, from new technologies to literal plastic viewing boxes, to accommodate our new circumstances, or what new edifices can be built to solve socially distanced viewing. Again, the thought prevails that theater is made of edifices and not of interactions.

Let us shift away from the tools that failed us in the past. Let’s start from the bones.

In the last year, we have been in the bones of the country, the bones of our own psyches, the bones of our practices as artists. The bones are piling up around us. There are literal bodies piling and no building will answer the questions those bodies ask.

In thinking toward my own performance and theater practice, I have engaged questions posed by death on both a large and an intimate scale with my piece *GO FORTH*. *GO FORTH* is a translation into contemporary performance of seven chapters from *Going Forth by Day*, a compendium of 4,000-year-old Egyptian funerary texts, commonly known in the West as *The Egyptian Book of The Dead*. Originally intended to provide the deceased with a blueprint to the afterlife, the collection excavates the ancient spells and incantations to propose burial not as erasure but as offering restitution and creating space for the presence of the absent, the imagined, and the longed for.

My father died in Burundi. At the burial ceremony, part of a ritualized grieving process, I was struck by the continuum of processing and performing death, and the intimacy between Black people and death around the world. This has been rendered ever more visible given the outside effect of Covid-19 on marginalized communities throughout the world, as well as the global outcry sparked by George Floyd’s death as well as all the other bodies, that are the product of state violence. *GO FORTH* is a repossession of the

“canon,” resituating this canon within our own histories as Black people. It is a form of remixing that points to the surge of revolutionary thought and labor among Black people around the globe in the mid-twentieth century that produced movements of solidarity between formerly enslaved and colonized peoples worldwide—a moment, in which looking inward and outward at the bones, at imperialism and death, mobilized powerful alliances from Harlem, Atlanta and New Orleans, to Cuba, Ethiopia, Senegal, Vietnam, Haiti, and Rwanda.

GO FORTH, like funerary altars from around the diaspora, contains a diverse group of materials that reference the idiosyncratic as well as the global. It includes original 16mm films mixing Jean Cocteau’s *Orphic Trilogy* with Egyptian death mythology; sculptures merging African and African-American bottle tree traditions and Marcel Duchamp’s ready-mades; performances of transcendence from evangelical preacher Benny Hinn, to Muhammad Ali, to anthropologist Jean Rouch’s *Les maîtres fous*. The audience enters through a photographic installation created in collaboration with artist Christopher Myers, a series of funerary murals initiating the audience into the performance’s mythological landscape. The work premiered at Performance Space 122’s COIL Festival in New York City in 2016 and then traveled to the amphitheater of the Kigali Genocide Memorial in Rwanda, Cairo International Experimental Theater Festival in Egypt, Center for Contemporary Art New Orleans, Stanford University, and Wesleyan University’s Center for The Arts.

The Artists: Cornell Alston, Justin Hicks, April Matthis, Christopher Myers, William Nadylam, Paul Pryce, Naomi Saito, Greig Sargeant, Liz Sargent, David Thomson, Ashley Vellano, Cheyanne Williams, Courtney Williams.

The Sources: E.A. Wallis Budge, *The Egyptian Book of the Dead*; Raymond Faulkner, *The Egyptian Book of the Dead: The Book of Going Forth by Day*; Normandi Ellis *Awakening Osiris*; Jean Cocteau, *Orphic Trilogy*; Jean Rouch, *Les maîtres fous*; Benny Hinn, *Mighty Anointing in Milwaukee*; and warm-up footage of Muhammad Ali.

Cast:

The deceased (REN*) (Justin Hicks)

Priest / Guide / the deceased (KA* JB*) (William Nadylam)

Osiris / Guide / the deceased (BA* SHEUT*) (David Thomson)

The deceased (REN*) (Cheyanne Williams)

The deceased follows the path laid by Osiris to eternal life. He becomes Osiris and takes his name. Mirroring, shadowing, copying. They are all deceased. They are all the priest. They are all Osiris.

*In *Going Forth By Day* the human soul is made up of five parts: Ren (name), Ba (personality), Ka (spirit or ‘vital spark’), Sheut (shadow), Jb (heart).

The following excerpt contains images courtesy of Kaneza Schaal; stills from Jean Rouch, *Les maîtres fous*; photos by Maria Baranova; and photos by Christopher Myers.

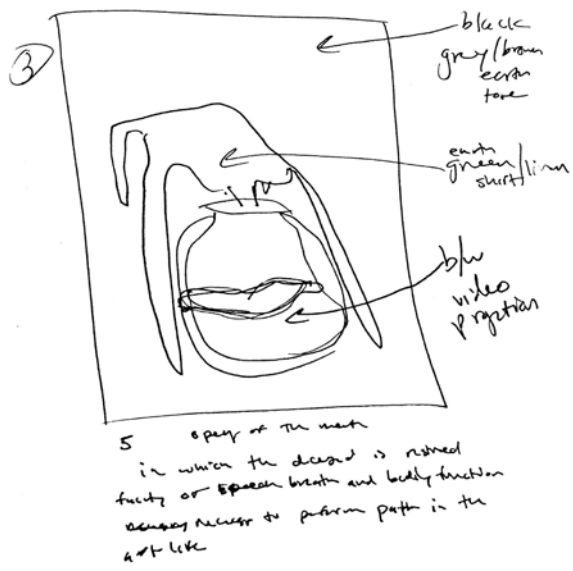
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Vignette Four: OPENING OF THE MOUTH

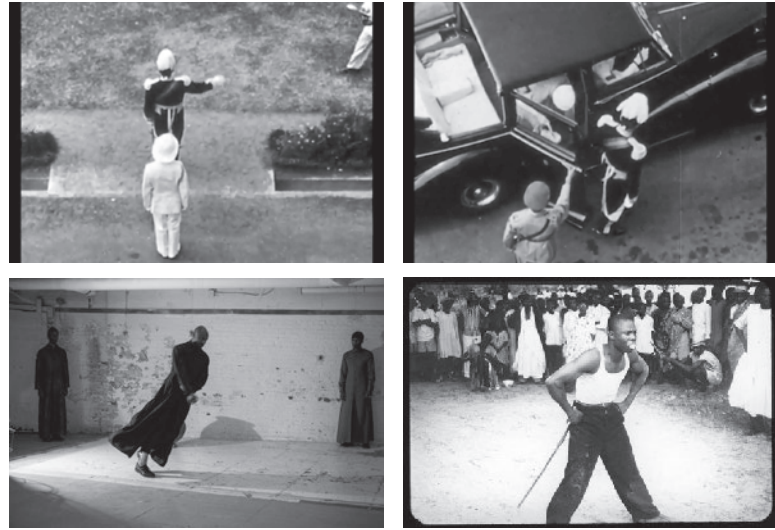
The Guide who is Osiris who is the deceased is shaking.
 The Guide who is the Priest who is the deceased watches.
 The deceased returns his head into the pot.
 The ritual in which the deceased regains the earthly faculties of breath, speech, sight and sexual function.



The Guide who is Osiris who is the deceased begins a dance.

This movement score is from *Les Maitres Fous*, a film by French Anthropologist Jean Rouché documenting a ritual in Niger that is a reposition of colonial magic. In the ritual the participants copy and imitate the movement and costume of a former colonial presence.

Osiris repossesses Rouché's film.



From the pot the deceased speaks:

I am I. I am Osiris. I have come because I wish to have come. In my time I've been struck dumb by the sun. Stars fall into my heart, a pool of fire. I am a man grown weary of ignorance, consumed in darkness and light. Give me a mouth; I want to talk. Untie these rags on my face. Open my mouth. Unbind my legs. Give me raisin cake and beer. Pry open my mouth with the red knife of heaven and I will speak of days unending. I am a child of earth and sky who rose from the buried, who followed his heart like light following the sun into this season of fire. Open my mouth and fill me with the countless lights of heaven. Bind the jaws of doomsayers and let me dance on their rotten teeth. I strain against the lies told about me as I strain against the bondage of earth. Build a bright fire of rags on the west bank of the Nile. We shall roast the leg of an antelope. Open my mouth. Bless me with ancient dreams. Give all the gods mouths to sing.

The deceased removes his head from the pot. He pushes the pot across the stage to the feet of The Guide who is the Priest who is the deceased.

The deceased copies and follows the movement score just completed by The Guide who is Osiris who is the deceased.

The deceased rushes downstage. He is contained by the Guides and by the light. His movement continues. He whirls, on top of the parachute, towards purification.



Dim light // SLIDE: Opening OF THE Mouth

- Ⓜ to sound
- Ⓝ to pot
- Ⓟ to floor

+ tape player
+ David expand vocabulary
simplify

- D look to J (frequently @ top 3 continued)
- play tape as pot slides (3 sec air at top or -- 4 min? / time keeper)
- J follow D's track
- Duet until J hit center / w - watch
- when W needed to structure / contain / support / advance
- all 3 for moment or flocking - JH leads this
- W hit sound when DT sends when JH hits parachute (on a note; 'deadly' if JH controls his out? touch parachute means 'some see until out')
- + rehearse w/out W
- Invoke osiris 3 hrs with you to purify - cleanse
- J begin to make sound "ha", breath, feet, build it, purify, next level, it feel too tired vocalize, 'ground' self forward, push, don't stop, well get you out of there
- W hit sound
- DT SWN play primitive → contain him, meet him as he meets walls
- DT & JH + beer room, take time
- song play some in on sound - house lights bump further
- song ends
- W steps forward for story lights go as W gets screen → invite audience to move

* still could be here

* on here

Ⓝ JH's S stand to JH

→ bear cansava OH, DT / film projector set / back light gets set over quiet prayer over beer as same, keep listening to william

W - STORY (not scissions)

D → STORY

J → 'he aint comy to mine'

1-42

W

J

D

1-25 listen to each other

25-42 orchestra

@ 25 overlap and do them all...

→ (most screen) → call to male

light ← W

D → light screen



Loud music: *Memory Band* by Rotary Connection.

The deceased stops. He is sweating. He leans over to catch his breath. The Guide who is Osiris who is the deceased joins him in the light, pats him on the back, ushers him upstage. The deceased pours the parachute into the pot. They exit.

The Guide who is the Priest who is the deceased faces the audiences, looks at them as he crosses the stage. When he hits center stage, he flashes a flirtatious smile and a little dance move. He turns off the music and addresses the audience.