

Suzan-Lori Parks
Deborah R. Geis
<http://www.press.umich.edu/titleDetailDesc.do?id=187338>
The University of Michigan Press

Suzan-Lori Parks

MICHIGAN MODERN DRAMATISTS

Enoch Brater, Series Editor

Michigan Modern Dramatists offers the theatergoer concise, accessible, and indispensable guides to the works of individual playwrights, as interpreted by today's leading drama critics. Forthcoming books in the series will consider the works of Sam Shepard, Samuel Beckett, and Wendy Wasserstein.

TITLES IN THE SERIES

Edward Albee by Toby Zinman

Suzan-Lori Parks by Deborah R. Geis

Suzan-Lori Parks
Deborah R. Geis
<http://www.press.umich.edu/titleDetailDesc.do?id=187338>
The University of Michigan Press

Suzan-Lori Parks

Deborah R. Geis

THE UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN PRESS

ANN ARBOR

Copyright © by the University of Michigan 2008

All rights reserved

Published in the United States of America by

The University of Michigan Press

Manufactured in the United States of America

⊗ Printed on acid-free paper

2011 2010 2009 2008 4 3 2 1

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, or otherwise, without the written permission of the publisher.

A CIP catalog record for this book is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Geis, Deborah R., 1960–

Suzan-Lori Parks / Deborah R. Geis.

p. cm. — (Michigan modern dramatists)

ISBN-13: 978-0-472-09946-7 (cloth : alk. paper)

ISBN-10: 0-472-09946-9 (cloth : alk. paper)

ISBN-13: 978-0-472-06946-0 (pbk. : alk. paper)

ISBN-10: 0-472-06946-2 (pbk. : alk. paper)

I. Parks, Suzan-Lori—Criticism and interpretation. I. Title.

PS3566.A736Z69 2008

812'.54—dc22

2008011492

Acknowledgments

So many people have responded to my efforts in writing this book with unflagging wisdom, wit, support, and generosity of spirit; I am deeply indebted to all of them. At the University of Michigan Press, my heartfelt thanks to LeAnn Fields for her interest in and tireless help with the project, to her assistants Anna Szymanski and Catherine Cassel, and to Marcia LaBrenz and Richard Isomaki. As always, I am grateful to Enoch Brater for his shining example and ongoing mentorship. I thank the two anonymous readers who commented on the manuscript of the project and made highly helpful suggestions. This project would not have been the same without the kindness of Suzan-Lori Parks, who not only wrote such dazzling plays, but who also responded graciously to my barrage of questions.

For sharing information about their wonderful productions and for their generosity in permitting me to use the photographs they provided, I am deeply grateful to the following people: Jason Bruffy and the Know Theatre of Cincinnati, Gigi Fenlon and DePauw University Theatre, Rob Melrose and the Cutting Ball Theater Company of San Francisco, Kyle Shepherd and the Actors Theatre of Louisville, Allison Eve Zell and HERE/The Mint Space, New York City.

Portions of this book were presented in earlier form at several conferences, including those of the American Literature Association, the Modern Language Association, the Literature- Film Association, and the Twentieth Century Literature Conference. My thanks to the conference and panel organizers for enabling me to share my work in progress, and to the attendees of these sessions for their provocative questions. The discussion of Parks's "red letter" plays was published in earlier form in the *Journal of American Drama and Theatre* 16.2 (Spring 2004), and I thank the editors of this publication for their permission to reprint.

At DePauw University, our staff members—especially Department of English secretary Bobbi Kelley, and Terry Bruner in Faculty

Development—have assisted me virtually every single day, and I deeply appreciate their work. Thanks to Neal Abraham, Meryl Altman, Robert Bottoms, Tom Chiarella, Vanessa Dickerson, Gigi Fenlon, Wayne Glausser, Eugene Gloria, Peter Graham, Joe Heithaus, Ronda Henry, James Lincoln, William G. Little, Marnie McInnes, Keith Nightenhelser, Greg Schwipps, Mike Sinowitz, Andrea Sununu, Chris White, and Lili Wright for the extra steps they took to support this project and to facilitate Ms. Parks’s visit to our campus.

Many thanks, as always, to my mother, Dorothy Geis, and to my sisters, Nancy Geis Bardgett and Sarah Geis, for their warmth and support. More than they realize, the following people have meant the world to me in their ongoing friendship and guidance: Maura Abrahamson, Joyce Ann, Anthony Barone, Tracy and Reinold Cornelius, Steven F. Kruger, Ed Ku, Kathleen Moore, Janet Pennisi, Claudia Petersen, Ron Scapp, Peter Schamel, Meryl Siegman, Robert Vorlicky, Karen Vrotsos, David J. Weiss, and Regina Wilmes. And nothing would be possible without the ability of James S. Bennett and his son, Alexander Bennett, to share my life and make me laugh.

Contents

- 1 Introduction: Under the Piano and All That Jazz
(Biography, Influences, Themes, Style)
- 23 Elements of Style: Early Plays
(*Betting on the Dust Commander*, *Pickling*,
Devotees in the Garden of Love)
- 44 Choral Explorations of Race and Politics
(*Imperceptible Mutabilities in the Third Kingdom*
and *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole*
Entire World)
- 75 Anatomizing *Venus*
- 97 Resurrecting Lincoln
(*The America Play* and *Topdog/Underdog*)
- 126 The “Red Letter” Plays
(*In the Blood* and *Fucking A*)
- 141 365 Plays, “New Black Math,” and Other Media
- 167 List of Premieres
- 169 Works Cited