

# **REVIEW: Rhodessa Jones and Idris Ackamoor: Fully Awake & Facing Seventy, Heaven Betta Bea Honky Tonk**

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by Rachael Appold

The performance at Dance Place on the evening of May 12th featured general seating, something that had not been used at this venue for about a year. As I walked into the theatre, an usher informed me that I could sit anywhere on the bleacher seating or at a table. Without understanding what tables she spoke of, I continued into the theatre where I saw several small, round, black tables sat along the downstage corners of the space. Lit candles perched atop the tables, and folding chairs surrounded them. The stage had effectively been turned into a cafe.

I opted to sit in the bleachers, wanting to view the “cafe seating” as part of the performance. Taking in the dim lighting and hushed audience whispers, I waited for Rhodessa Jones and Idris Ackamoor’s show to begin.

The night began with a piece titled *Clearing the Ether*, which featured an immediate disposal of the fourth wall. Idris Ackamoor appeared onstage in a nude unitard with cheetah print fabric attached to his neck and waist. A cheetah print hat sat atop his head, and bell-covered cuffs hugged his ankles. Playing a large, beautifully-decorated didgeridoo, Ackamoor danced up the aisle of the bleachers. He allowed his ankle bells to jingle as he executed steps in different rhythms. Whispered “wows” and “oohs” rose from the audience.

Pausing from playing his instrument, he began chanting and signaling for the audience to repeat after him. We did as he instructed; chants rang out from the audience as Ackamoor made his way back down the bleachers. He was followed by a woman’s voice calling out, “I remember!” The entire audience turned around in their seats to see Rhodessa Jones draped in white at the top of the bleachers. So began the second piece of the night, *May I Remember... the Grandma Cole Story*. Ms. Jones convulsed, spun around, and threw her hands up toward the ceiling as she sang a heart wrenching song: “I remember, I was in the water and they killed my father... I was in the water and they took my mother.” My heart broke as Jones sang out in a pained yet beautiful voice. She danced down the aisle, taking time to stare intently into the eyes of different audience members.

Jones paused next to my mother, who sat in the row in front of me, taking her hand and leaning in as she sang. I saw my mother, a grown woman, transform into a child listening and learning from Ms. Jones’s story. My mother nodded as she grasped Jones’s hand. I thought she might cry.

Jones made her way to the stage, still turning and convulsing. Her song transformed into spoken word. She spoke of a woman’s mother who was brought to the United States via a slave ship. Jones began the story from the perspective of the daughter, but quickly transitioned to the voice of the mother.

The mother was only a child at the time of her kidnapping. The slavers, unafraid of a small child, allowed her to play on the deck of the ship while the other older slaves were kept caged in what Jones described as a “dark hole.” From the perspective of the child, Jones described the other captives on the ship as caged birds begging to be set free. Smiling under the blue sky, the child unlocked the cages, allowing “the birds” to fly around the deck.

The child laughed as she held the locks in her hands, seeing the slavers chase after captives by whom they were outnumbered. "Too late," Jones cried out in the voice of the child while standing on a bleacher step. Her movements were more erratic than before, and I felt as though I was seeing the young stolen child through the grown woman who danced before me.

Ms. Jones threw her arms overhead as she lamented that the sky above this young child had turned gray. Slavers charged angrily, hopeful captives were returned to their cage, and the young child was raped; this was punishment, Jones explained, for setting the "birds" free. Jones crashed to the stage floor as this last detail escaped from her mouth.

With that, Rhodessa Jones exited the stage, leaving Idris Ackamoor to play a short melody on the saxophone. The audience seemed to reel over everything they had just seen. The first piece had flowed so seamlessly into the next that I could not help but process the two pieces as one. The raw emotion with which Jones had just sang, danced, and spoken was surreal. Her performance, combined with my knowledge that her slave ship narrative may have happened to someone (or multiple people) in my family line made the second piece even more emotional. Ms. Jones lightened the mood with her next piece, titled *Welcome*, in which she introduced herself and her musical partner, Ackamoor. She stood at a podium and explained that this show was designed to be her "living eulogy." Jones shared with the audience a saying which belonged to her grandmother: "Don't bring me flowers when I'm dead. Bring them to me now so I can enjoy them." With that, Jones transitioned into the rest of the performance. One particularly well-received piece was *Under the African Moon*. She walked into the audience, taking a stand on the second bleacher and spoke of her time visiting Africa. She held her arms outward toward the stage as she recalled speaking out against apartheid during her trip.

In this story, she was approached by a young African man who, upon seeing her exclaimed, "I've found you! You were one of the stolen ones, and you've finally returned!" I could infer that the man in question viewed Jones as one of the Africans stolen during the slave trade who had finally found her way home.

Another piece which I found striking was *Midnight to Munich*. In this work, Jones described the time she and Idris Ackamoor smuggled an Albanian family into Germany. Ackamoor charmed airport security with his talent for playing jazz music so that the guards would forget to check the group's passports. This work ended with Jones praising Ackamoor for the charm and elegance with which he helped the Albanian family.

Jones held out her hand toward Ackamoor as he picked up his saxophone and began to play. To my surprise, Ackamoor began to tap dance as he played. He had remained on stage throughout Jones's story, and I had not seen him change into tap shoes. The audience let out gasps as the musician performed two art forms at once. Tap dancing while simultaneously playing the saxophone is a concept which had never before crossed my mind. To say that Ackamoor executed this section brilliantly would be an understatement.

With all of the obvious work that went into this performance, I could not help but wonder about Ms. Jones's process for writing the show and how long it took. During the talk-back at the end of the evening, I got the opportunity to ask her about this. "It's been 30 or 40 years," she informed me, speaking of the length of time in which these pieces had come together. "It's like a patchwork quilt." Walking into the Dance Place theatre that evening, I did not expect to be greeted with such an emotional collaboration of dance, music, and poetry. The program also included works titled *A Funeral in Alabama*, *Heaven Betta Bea Honky Tonk!*, *Talking to Ghosts*, *China Lane*, *Daddy – A Lesson in Forgiveness*, *Prayer for Changing Times*, and *Blessings Abound: Soliloquy for Michael Brown*.

Rhodessa Jones is also the co-artistic director of San Francisco-based performance company Cultural Odyssey. She has many human rights-based performance projects under her belt, including directing *Media Project: Theater for Incarcerated Women*. For this project, Jones worked with both incarcerated women and women with HIV during a performance workshop. Idris Ackamoor is an artist of several different mediums, including composing, playing the saxophone, and tap dancing. He is the founder of Cultural Odyssey, AATAIN!, and Idris Ackamoor & the Pyramids. Ackamoor is also the composer of the top album, "We Be All Africans".

Jones and Ackamoor met in 1979 while performing in a theater. The two have since toured around the world, specializing in autobiographical theater and sharing genuine and inspiring stories with the public.

Perhaps what added to the sincerity and intimacy of the show was the manner in which Rhodessa looked directly into the audience members' eyes. Maybe it was the cafe-style seating shadowed under dim candlelight. It could also be the fact that Jones and Ackamoor tapped into a history that we both shared. I would like to believe that it was a combination of these aspects which made the event so successful.