



Northwestern | WIRTZ CENTER

**THE
DEATH OF THE
LAST
BLACK MAN IN THE
WHOLE
ENTIRE
WORLD**

AKA
THE NEGRO
BOOK OF THE DEAD

FEB 12-14 2021

NEW VIRTUAL PERFORMANCE

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Northwestern University's
Virginia Wadsworth Wirtz Center for the Performing Arts &
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proudly present

THE DEATH OF THE LAST BLACK MAN

IN THE WHOLE ENTIRE WORLD

AKA THE NEGRO
BOOK OF THE DEAD

Written by Suzan-Lori Parks

DIRECTED BY
Manna-Symone Middlebrooks

PRODUCTION TEAM

Costume and Scenic Designer
NORA MARLOW SMITH

Associate Producer
ISMAEL LARA

Production and Lighting Designer
BRIAN JORDAN

Dramaturg
LINNEA VALDIVIA

Stage Manager
MICHAEL DAALDER

CAST

Black Woman with Fried Drumstick
JAZZLYN K LUCKETT

Prunes and Prisms
MAYA SCHANKE

Ham
MAYA ABRAM

Before Columbus
KEVIN AOUSSOU

Black Man with Watermelon
ALJALEEL MCGHEE

Queen-Then-Pharaoh-Hatshepsut
ALEXANDRIA CRAWFORD

And Bigger And Bigger and Bigger
ELLIOT MARVIN SIMS

Lots of Grease and Lots of Pork
OLIVIA PRYOR

Voice On Thuh Tee V
RYAN FOREMAN

Yes and Green Black-Eyed Peas and Cornbread
SYDNEY HASTINGS-SMITH

February 12–14
Virtual Performance
Available On-Demand

The running time for this production is 58 minutes with a post show discussion to follow.

The Virginia Wadsworth Wirtz Center for the Performing Arts is a member of Theatre Communications Group (TCG), the national organization for the American Theatre.

Program Cover & Promotional Artwork by Melissa Rutherfordord
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DIRECTOR'S NOTE

This play is an invocation— a spell that connects 2021 to the 90s when the play was written to 1619 when the first African people stepped foot on American soil to 1478 B.C when Hatshepsut ruled Egypt to the beginning of Black life. Suzan-Lori Parks has gifted us an access point to the ancestral plane. We find ourselves in The Great Hole of History, a cacophonous ritual space where past, present, and future collide. Where there is a story of Black life written under every rock. Where figures dance with rhythms of West African drums and slapjazz, do a two-step or the electric slide, sing and spin in ring-shouts, send up prayers in the name of the departed. The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World reminds us that we are never alone--that as long as we have access to the ancestors it is impossible to walk through life alone.

To honor the gift of the play and the ancestors we will call on, the creative team and ensemble have chosen to dedicate their bios to Black people who lost their lives too soon. The playwright's signature Rep & Rev style of writing echos our current need to say her/his/their name(s) — to keep the spirits of departed Black people with us as we work towards radical change and continue to understand humanity. The pain of losing Black people and celebration of thier lives exist in the same heartbeat. And with each new heartbeat, there is remembering, reencounter, remembering.

MANNA-SYMONÉ MIDDLEBROOKS

DRAMATURG'S NOTE

Suzan-Lori Parks does not, repeat not, write plays with characters. The bodies that you might see on stage (or, these days, on a screen) are not discrete individuals with well-defined edges; rather, they are specters, signals, fragments of ideas. “They are not *characters*” she writes emphatically in her essay “Elements of Style.” “To call them so could be an injustice. They are *figures, figments, ghosts, roles, lovers maybe, speakers maybe, shadows, slips, players maybe, maybe someone else’s pulse*” (Parks 12). In her plays, Parks summons these figures (and their attached ancestral phantasms) as they have existed in the past, as they exist now and how they might exist later on. Time in the worlds of Parks’s plays does not move linearly—it circles, constantly reinventing itself as the past, present and future all collapse on one another.

One of the most important considerations of her play *Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World* is the relationship between ritual and performance. In writing this play, Parks drew inspiration from the tradition and ritual contained in the Bardo Thödol, (Tibetan: “Liberation in the Intermediate State Through Hearing”) also called *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*. (Fun fact: This is where the addendum “aka the Negro Book of the Dead” that was added in 2016 for the Signature Theatre Production in New York City originated). The text comes from a Tibetan Buddhist tradition and describes the processes through which a person’s consciousness moves after death and assists in its rebirth: “While in the bardo between life and death, the consciousness of the deceased can still apprehend words and prayers spoken on its behalf, which can help it to navigate through its confusion and be reborn into a new existence that offers a greater chance of attaining enlightenment” (Stefon, Encyclopædia Britannica). One way of understanding this play is by thinking of these figures as existing in the bardo and engaging in rituals to help guide Black Man with Watermelon through his many deaths (and, perhaps in burying him ushering him through his eventual rebirth).

Through all its linguistic and dialectical complexity, its frank and unrelenting depictions of pain, persecution and death, it is important to remember that this story cannot be told without love. The love between Black Man with Watermelon and Black Woman with Fried Drumstick exists despite the physical and systemic violence that permeates their world and that of their fellow figures. Their love for each other transcends many deaths and many lifetimes. Though Parks has, at times, argued that this play is one without a plot, this is a story of these two figures, the love they share and the strength it takes to let go after death.

LINNEA VALDIVIA

CAST BIOS

MAYA ABRAM (Ham) Chad Roberston (1992-Feb. 2017). Chad Roberston (25), unarmed, was shot in Chicago by an Amtrak police officer at Union Station terminal while on an hour layover returning to MN from a funeral in Memphis, TN. Chad Roberston was a father of two young children and worked construction in MN. He was a father, son, uncle, and brother.

KEVIN AOUSSOU (Before Columbus) Janisha Fonville was a Black person murdered by a police officer during a mental health call in Feb 2015 at 20 years old. Janisha was working on her mental health and towards her GED when her life was cut short. The loss of her life must remind us of the changes needed in policing our communities and our approaches to mental health. Killing those coping with mental health problems is not a solution. For more information about Janisha, please visit <https://www.nycshutitdown.org/janisha-fonville>.

ALEXANDRIA CRAWFORD (Queen-Then-Pharaoh-Hatshepsut) Breonna Taylor was a Black woman who lived from June 5th, 1993-March 13th, 2020. Breonna was shot multiple times and killed by Louisville police officers during an attempt to carry out a raid. At 26 years old, she served as an EMT for the city of Louisville, and up until her death, she worked full time as an ER Technician. Breonna was very close to her family and friends and was known to be a light in every space that she entered. For more information on Breonna Taylor visit: <https://justiceforbreonna.org/> and <http://breonnataylorfoundation.org/>.

RYAN FOREMAN (Voice on thuh Tee V) Hecky Powell was a Black man who lived from 1948-2020. He passed away in May of last year due to complications from Covid-19. As the “unofficial Mayor of Evanston”, Hecky not only ran one of the most popular BBQ restaurants in the midwest, but was a community organizer. He mentored many students, created charitable organizations, and was as genuine as can be. For more information about Hecky Powell, please visit: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/04/us/hecky-powell-dead-coronavirus.html> and <https://www.heckys.com/>

AL HEARTLEY (Old Man River Jordan): Trayvon Martin was a Black man who lived from 1995-2012. He was shot and killed on his way from a 7/11 convenience store with a bag of skittles in his pocket. Trayvon was known as “Crazy Legs” by his parent and called his mother “Cupcake.” He wanted to pursue a career in aviation. For more information visit, <https://www.trayvonmartinfoundation.org/>.

SYDNEY HASTINGS-SMITH (Yes and Greens Black-Eyed Peas and Cornbread) Dr. Susan Moore was a Black person who lived from 1968-2020. She died of COVID-19 after weeks of fighting both the virus and medical racism, which she documented publicly on social media. Dr. Susan Moore was dedicated to the field of medicine and loved caring for people, including her parents and her 19-year-old son. She was an enthusiastic member of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc, and was committed to helping her son pursue higher education. For more information about Dr. Susan Moore and to support her family, please visit <https://www.gofundme.com/f/dr-susan-moores-family-assistance>

JAZZLYN K. LUCKETT (Black Woman with Fried Drumstick) Atatiana Jefferson was a Black person who lived from 1990-2019. Atatiana was shot and killed when a police officer--responding to a call for a wellness check at her home--fired through her window. Atatiana had plans to become a doctor. Keeping with a money-saving mentality that carried over from childhood, Atatiana paid her way through undergrad where she majored in biology and worked in pharmaceutical equipment sales while she saved for medical school and cared for her mother. For more information, visit <https://www.justiceforatatiana.com/>

CAST BIOS

ALJALEEL MCGHEE (Black Man with Watermelon) Elijah McClain was a Black person who lived from 1996-2019. He was stopped by police in Aurora, Colorado for wearing a ski mask due to being anemic. Police disregarded his autism, choked him until he was unconscious and then asked him to be injected with 500mg of Ketamine which caused cardiac arrest and brain death. He was a massage therapist that enjoyed playing violin at animal shelters. His last words were, "I'm an introvert. I'm just different. That's all, I'm so sorry."

OLIVIA PRYOR (Lots of Grease and Lots of Pork) Michelle Cusseaux was a Black woman who lived to 50 years old. In 2014, Cusseaux was killed by a Phoenix police officer during a mental health check. According to her mother, Fran Garrett, Michelle was extremely funny, generous, loved children, and deeply loved her mother. In Michelle's memory, Garrett hosts an annual toy give-away and mental health event. For more information about Michelle Cusseaux, you can hear from her mother on the episode of the podcast Intersectionality Matters! entitled "8. When They See Her: The Story of Michelle Cusseaux."

MAYA SCHANKE (Prunes and Prisms) Juanita Moore was a Black woman who lived from June 28, 1932, to February 5, 2021. In 2021, Juanita passed away peacefully as a result of medical complications. Juanita was a beloved mother, grandmother, and sister. She is remembered for her devotion to her family and her welcoming presence and leaves behind many fond memories from her 88 years. She will be missed dearly.

ELLIOT MARVIN SIMS (And Bigger And Bigger And Bigger) Jean Shem Botham (26). The world knows Botham Jean as the young man shot to death in his own apartment by ex-Dallas cop, Amber Guyger. Botham was a preacher. A singer. A volunteer. A leader. Co-workers describe him as joyful. "He was the light in a dark room." For more information about, Jean Botham, please visit: [<https://www.google.com/amp/s/www.nbcnews.com/news/amp/nca1061146>] [<https://www.khou.com/mobile/article/news/local/texas/who-was-botham-jean/285-c106a46e-3ba9-4039-acaa-dbf482ec2aa>]

MICHAEL DAALDER (Stage Manager) Laquan McDonald was a Black man who lived from 1997 to 2014. He was shot 16 times while walking away from police officers who had arrived on the scene seconds before. McDonald was a jokester who could make friends and family laugh until they cried, and he loved giving hugs. Still in high school when he was murdered, teachers and friends described him as outgoing, jovial, talkative, and funny. For more information about Laquan McDonald, please visit: <https://16shots.wbez.org/>

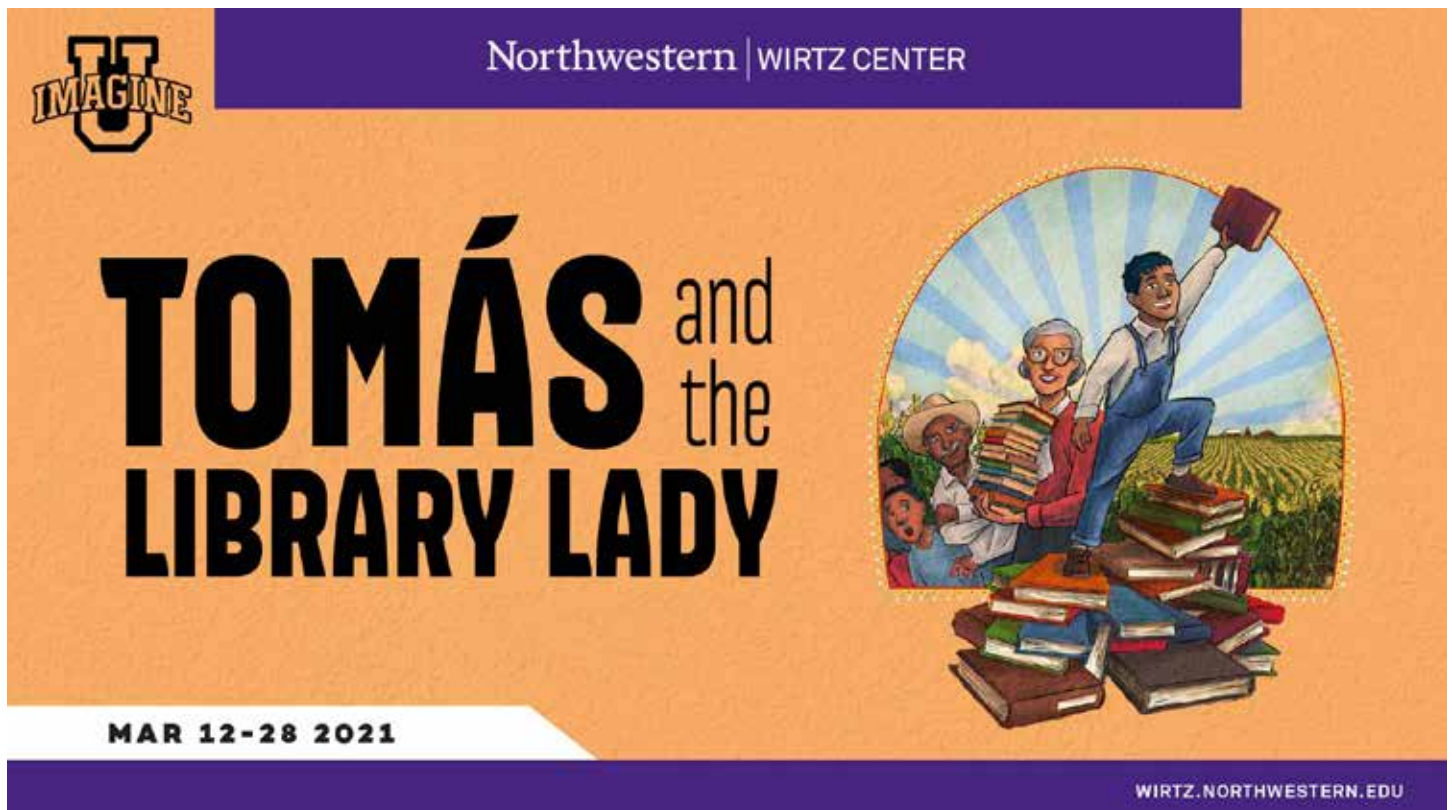
BRIAN JORDAN (Lighting Designer) David McAtee was a Black person who lived from 1966-2020. McAtee was shot by Louisville Police on June 1st, 2020 after a crowd formed around police officers; McAtee was shot when police opened fire on the crowd. McAtee was the owner of popular Barbeque spot YaYa's BBQ. He was said to be a pillar of the community, often offering free meals to Louisville police officers, and had recently moved to a new location in one of the busiest parts of western Louisville with hopes of buying and expanding into the lot nearby. For more information about David McAtee, please visit <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/04/us/louisville-unrest-david-mcatee.html>.

CAST BIOS

MANNA-SYMONE MIDDLEBROOKS (Director) Dominique “Rem’mie” Fells was a Black trans woman who lived from July 30, 1992 to June 8, 2020. Her body was found stabbed, with her legs severed on the banks of the Schuylkill River in Philadelphia, PA. Dominique majored in Fashion Design at Cheyney University, with a concentration in Business Studies, and had a love for dancing. She was very close with her mother who says, “[Dominique] lived her truth so loud that you could hear her a mile away.” For more information about Dominique “Rem’mie” Fells, please visit <https://www.bouldingmortuaryinc.com/obituaries/Dominique-Remmie-Fells?oblId=15065878>.

NORA MARLOW SMITH (Set and Costume Designer) Saheed Vassel was a 34 year old Black man living in Crown Heights, Brooklyn who was murdered by the NYPD on April 4, 2018 on the corners of Crown St and Utica Ave. He was 34 years old. He was beloved by his family and his community. His murderers have yet to be brought to justice. For more information about Saheed Vassel please visit changethenypd.org

LINNEA VALDIVIA (Dramaturg) Aidan Ellison was a Black person who died at 19 years old in 2020. Ellison was shot and killed by a white man in Ashland, Oregon; several outlets initially described his death as being due to his “playing loud music.” Aidan loved music and had an infectious smile. For more information about Aidan, please visit https://www.gofundme.com/f/27gzl09zxc?utm_source=customer&utm_campaign=p_cp+share-sheet&utm_medium=copy_link_all.



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