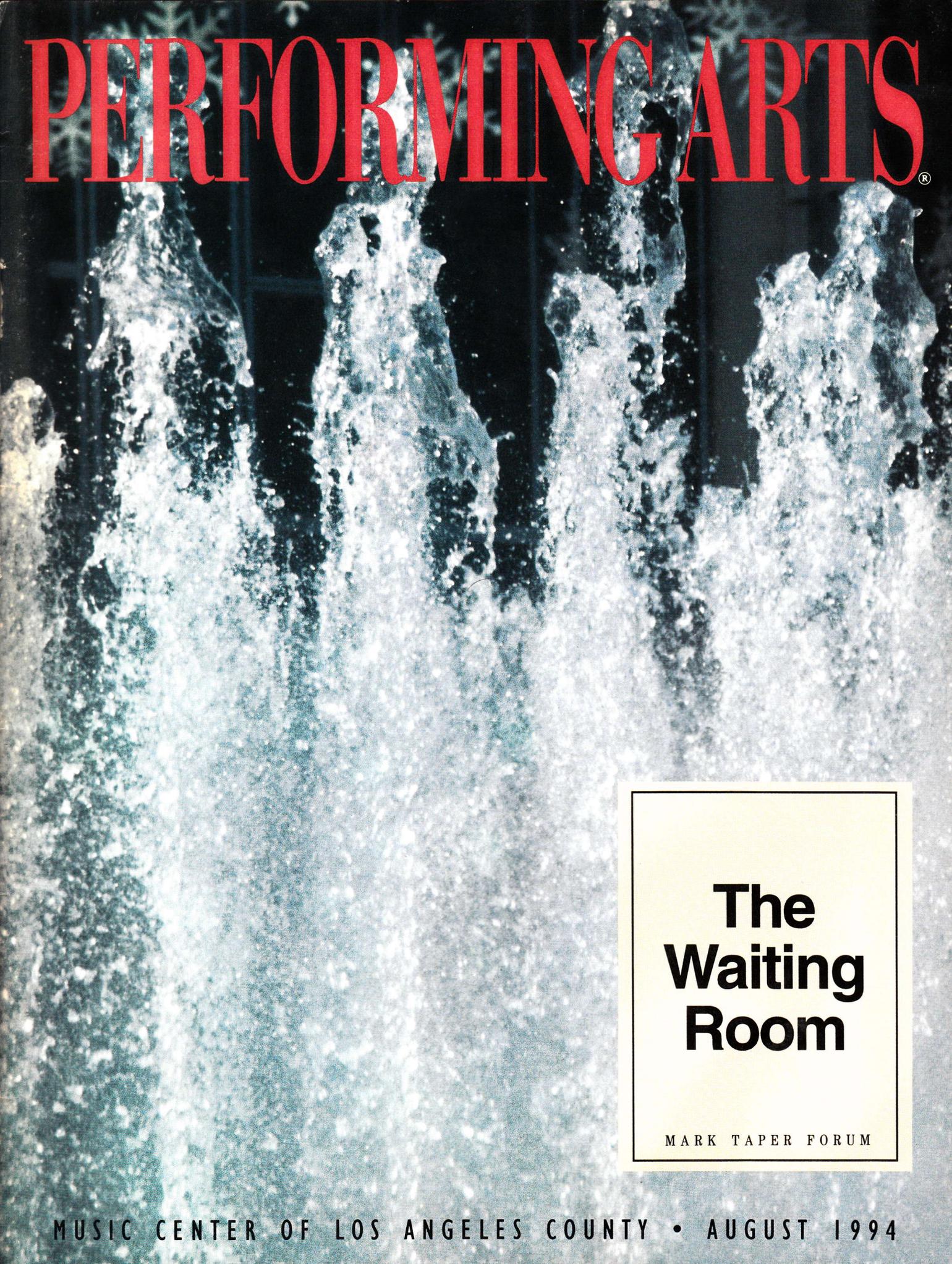


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The Waiting Room

MARK TAPER FORUM

MUSIC CENTER OF LOS ANGELES COUNTY • AUGUST 1994

In the Name of the Father... and the Mother, Too

by Meri Nana-Ama Danquah

IT IS ABOUT HOW, AT LAST, I recognized the connection between mutilation and enslavement that is at the root of domination of women in the world...It's in all the movies that terrorize women... The man with the knife...But those of us whose chastity belt was made of leather, or of silk and diamonds, or of fear and not of our own flesh... We are the perfect audience, mesmerized by our unconscious knowledge of what men, with the collaboration of our mothers, do to us.

—Alice Walker from *Possessing the Secret of Joy*

There is a woman who stands alone at the intersection of hate and love. She is of no age, of no race. On her body lies the dust and grime of history. A film of sin so thick it cannot be removed or covered. In her eyes there is a love so piercing that it must be cloaked. You have seen her, I am sure.

She is a bride-to-be in Santa Monica who veils her face with white lace for her waiting groom. She is Aphrodite/Venus, the goddess of love. And Sarah Bartmann, the Negro dubbed “the Hottentot Venus,” whose naked and mutilated body, was placed on display upon her death. She is Medusa, the woman whose stare turned men to stone; the one who was beheaded. But long before she was any of them or any of us, she was Eve; that woman who we were taught to believe brought us this shame. It is she who stands at the root of all evil.

And God told Adam:

I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed

And God told Eve:

I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children; and thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee. [Gen.3:15-17]

There is a special female vulnerability which our mothers have handed down from generation to generation. You hear it in our nursery rhymes, our lullabies, the secrets we share with each other. It is in our own minds. We are the walking wounded who allow ourselves and our children to be mentally subjugated and physically oppressed. Though the corsets have been discarded and the feet unbound, pieces of our flesh are still being cut and peeled for the consumption and enjoyment of men. We know the power of the knife be it through culture or medical science. No breast, ovary or uterus exists that is too healthy not to be removed. Or enhanced. No female has a mind too brilliant not to eventually be accused of resorting to the usage of her body as a

means of temptation and manipulation.

In India there is an ultrasound clinic on nearly every corner which lies adjacent to an alley. In the alley there is a woman who waits with rusty hangers and other sharp contraptions for the pregnant who have discovered that within them breathes what should be an infant girl.

In East Africa, the girls of the Samburu tribe are adorned from chin to shoulders with tightly beaded necklaces in much the same way the feet of Chinese girls were bound. With age and the constant addition of these necklaces, the neck is unnaturally elongated. This ritual is supposedly performed solely for the purposes of cultural beautification. However, if a woman disobeys or betrays her husband, removal of her beads is a form of punishment which he may choose, the result of which is death by asphyxiation.

Throughout many countries in Africa and parts of Asia there is an initiation ceremony in which all young girls must partake. It is called clitoridectomy. With a sharp rock or a kitchen knife, the woman performing the operation, sometimes the mother, slits the head of the girl's clitoris before cutting it off. The skin of the clitoris is scraped clean until the “surgeon” reaches its root, which is disengaged and sliced off. The labia minora of the child, who is usually no younger than five and no older than twelve, is cut and removed. The same is done to the labia majora. Afterwards the child is then sewn shut with the exception

of a narrow opening left for the purposes of urination and menstruation. This procedure is a guarantee of virginity and chastity from the child's family to her future husband. When the girl marries, her stitches are removed. She is, in essence, opened—like a gift—for her husband.

I once met a woman who had been a victim of this sort of mutilation. It was she who first explained to me the procedure, which she intended to have performed on her own daughters. I asked her how she dealt with the pain. She said she prayed. “To whom,” I asked. “To God,” she replied. “But wasn't it God who cursed you as woman to begin with?,” I tested. Her voice was soft yet strong when she asserted, “It wasn't a curse. I now have a husband. My family has honor. It was a blessing. It was a blessing.” And in her eyes, which had never aged beyond the theft of her female innocence, I could tell that she truly believed it.

Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted.

Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth.

Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake.

[Matthew 5:3-12]

Meri Nana-Ama Danquah, a native of Ghana, is a poet and journalist.



L to R-
June Kyoko
Lu, Jacalyn
O'Shaughnessy
and Lela Ivey.