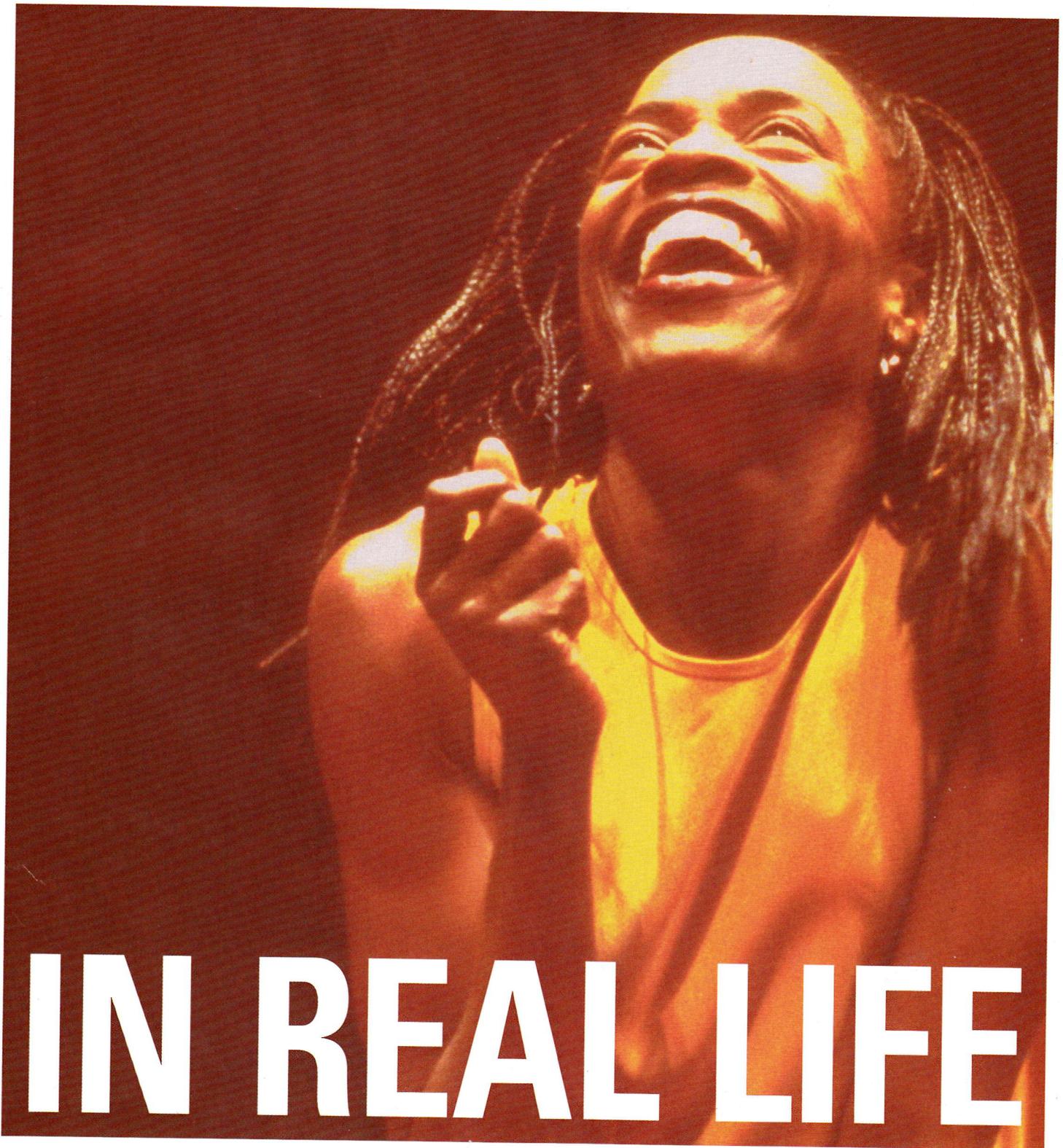


PERFORMING **ARTS** magazine

JULY 2001



IN REAL LIFE

Center Theatre Group • Mark Taper Forum 2000/2001

MUSIC CENTER

Dream Boogie

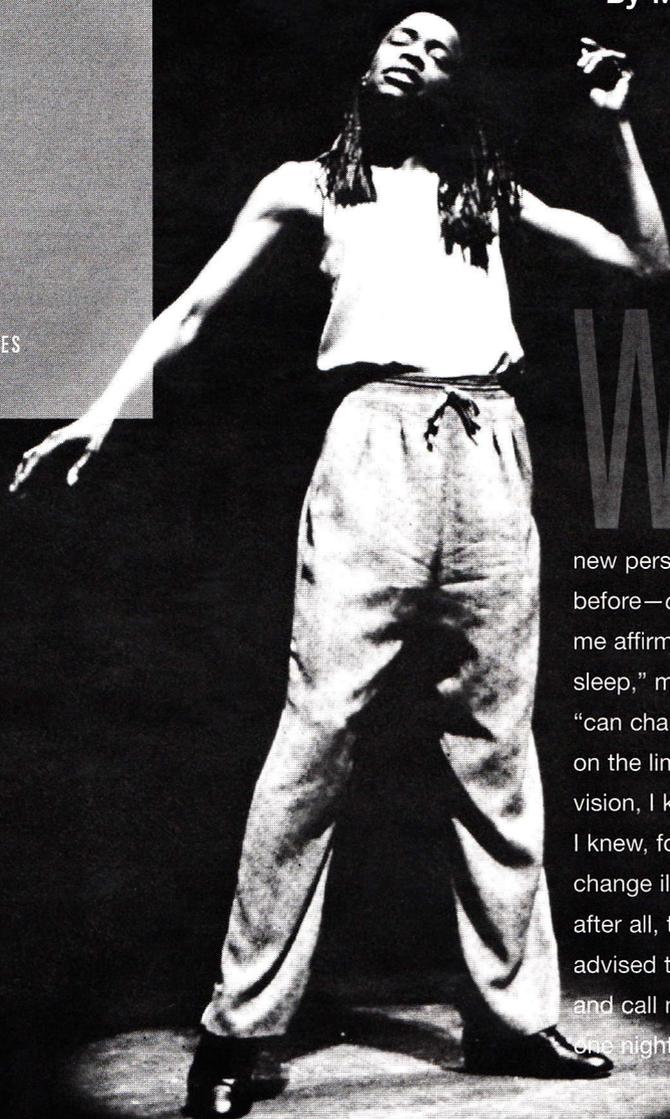
Good morning, daddy!
Ain't you heard
The boogie-woogie rumble
Of a dream deferred?
Listen closely:
You'll hear their feet
Beating out and beating out a —
You think
It's a happy beat?
Listen to it closely:
Ain't you heard
something underneath
like a —
What did I say?
Sure,
I'm happy!
Take it away!
Hey pop!
Re-hop!
Mop!
Y-e-a-h!

—LANGSTON HUGHES
(1902-67)

OVERNIGHT

(after night, after night)

By Meri Nana-Ama Danquah



When I was younger, I used to think that change happened overnight. I used to think that it was possible to go to sleep and wake up in the morning, different. Not necessarily a new person, just a little bit different than before—*changed*. Even the adults around me affirmed this notion. “A good night’s sleep,” my grandmother used to say, “can change just about anything.” Based on the limited scope of my girl-child vision, I knew that to be the gospel truth. I knew, for instance, that one night could change illness to wellness. Which was, after all, the reason doctors usually advised their patients to “take two aspirin and call me in the morning.” I knew that one night could change shortness

Charlayne Woodard.

In dream life there were no rules, only a limitless imagination.

into height because of the way my relatives would always say, “Girl, look how tall you’ve gotten. You must have grown at least a foot overnight.” I knew, also, that one night could carry you right over the threshold of one year, be that an age-year or a calendar-year.

Obviously, there was something magical about night-time hours, something magical about sleep and what it inspired—dreams, those mystical journeys of the subconscious mind. In dream life there were no rules, only a limitless imagination. The entire world was transparent. Content was as significant, or as meaningless, as context. Truths relied on emotion and instinct. They were personal, complex, permeable; they were not simply the bareness of bones or the hardness of facts. What mattered most was the moment, be it in fantasy or in memory. Time was a tool, intended only to unite. Just as gravity was a myth for those who feared the freedom of weightlessness. Nothing was impossible.

That, however, was not the case in real life. In real life, events seemed to follow a certain law of logic. Only the tangible was visible, and only facts were interpreted as truths. Time was linear; it marched forward, not to the rhythm of your desires, but to the tick and the tock of its own predictable agenda. Gravity was inescapable: what went up had to come back down. And what was down would most likely never have the opportunity to soar.

What I could never figure out as a child was exactly how the transformations took place, how the world of the dream managed to seep its way into the world of reality to create change. And it would take many years before I would finally begin to make some sense of it all. In fact, I was well into my 20s when I came to understand that change is not something that often — if ever — happens overnight. Regardless of its appearance of immediacy, change is a process, a gradual movement whose effects can only be fully seen and appreciated in hindsight.

Are we living yet? You bet. You bet. We're living now. Okay.

*Okay. For a moment I don't hear it.
The boogie-woogie rumble*

*of a dream deferred. My heart beats out the
boogie-woogie rumble*

of a dream deferred.

— *In Real Life* by Charlayne Woodard.

You see, I had moved to Los Angeles to write literature — poetry, fiction and creative nonfiction. I had moved to Los Angeles to try my hand at success, but what I became was knee-deep in poverty. For eight years, I had hoped and struggled. A few of my writings had been published here and there. For the most part, it was never anything truly major or career-defining. But by then, it was too late. For as long as I could remember, every time I had entered that dream world, I had carried a small piece of it back with me into my waking world. Year by year, piece by piece, until eventually I found myself, in my waking hours, being guided by that patchwork, that dream which dares to stand strong against the harshness of daylight. Hoping that if I followed it for long enough and believed in it hard enough, it could be realized, it could become my real life. That’s what happened to me. That’s what, I think, happens to most people who chase after what, at first glance, might seem like the unattainable. And I was too far in to turn back. This was a path I wanted to pave.

For a while, I still held faith in the powers of the dream life and how they shaped the depth and direction of the so-called real life. But by the time my utilities had been shut off and I was being threatened with eviction, I was broke and beat-down. I had sacrificed and given up so much, that faith was about all I had left. Then, quite suddenly, things turned around. Just like that. One thing after the other. First the agent, then the book proposal, then an auction, then a deal and the largest check I had ever received in my life.

“Wow,” a friend said to me. “It’s all happening so fast. Everything in your life is changing. You’re going to be like this totally major overnight literary sensation.” Overnight? Overnight, I thought. How many times had I heard that? Read that? Said that? As if there is no point of separation between the dream and the achievement. As if the bridge between those two things, those weeks and months and years of yearning and trying and needing to hold on; as if that period of transition, of transformation is not the very thing that heals us, repairs the wreckage of our lives, grows us up and makes us whole.

“No,” I told my friend. “Change doesn’t happen overnight and neither do dreams. At least not in real life they don’t.” ■

MERI NANA-AMA DANQUAH, a native of Ghana, is the author of *Willow Weep for Me: A Black Woman's Journey Through Depression* (Norton/Ballantine) and the editor of *Becoming American: Personal Essays by First Generation Immigrant Women* (Hyperion). She is presently writing a book which will be published by Riverhead.