

PERFORMING ARTS®

JANUARY 1998

MARK TAPER FORUM

● MUSIC CENTER OF LOS ANGELES COUNTY • CENTER THEATRE GROUP • 1997/98 SEASON

N E A T

When Loyalties Collide

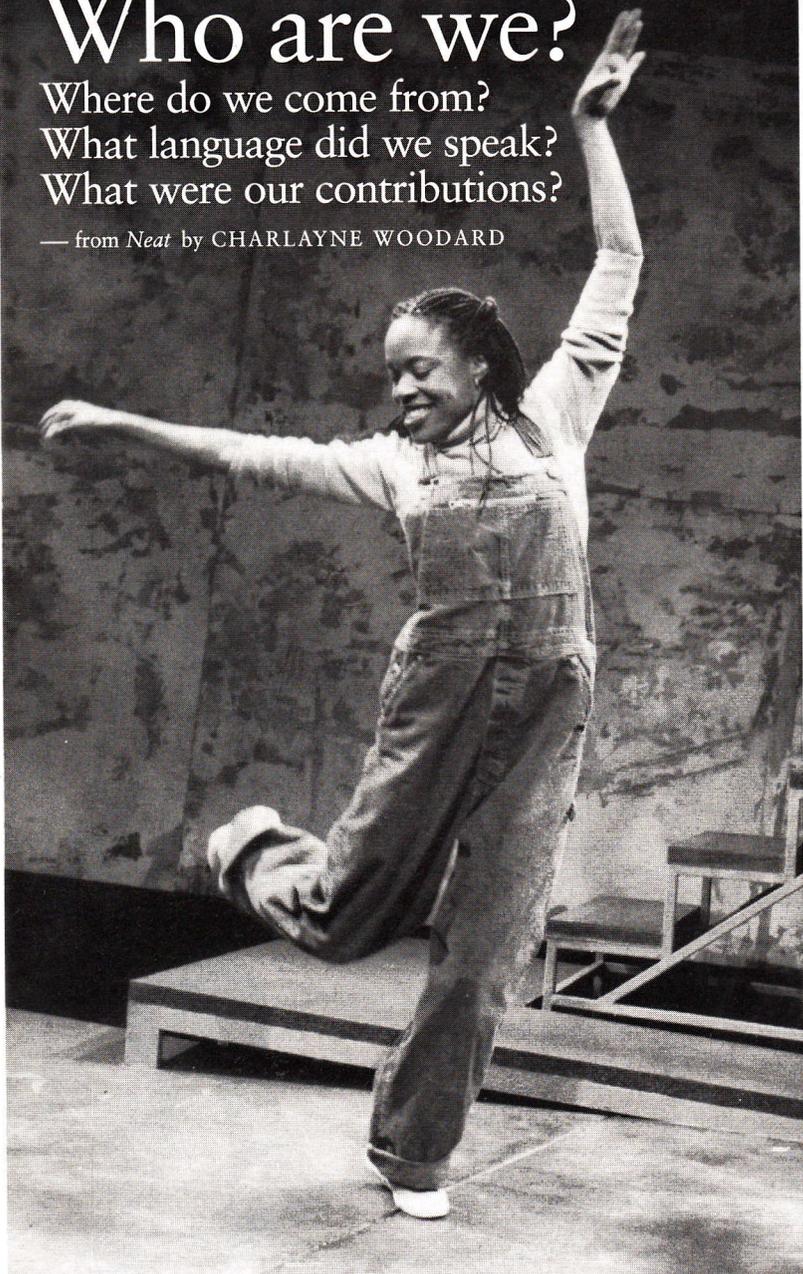
Who are we?

Where do we come from?

What language did we speak?

What were our contributions?

— from *Neat* by CHARLAYNE WOODARD



Charlayne Woodard performing in *Neat*. Photo by Susan Johann.

BY MERI NANA-AMA DANQUAH

So often the search for self begins with reflections we see in the faces of others, with the need to be able to claim the community in which we live, the one that defines our day-to-day reality. When I first arrived in America from Ghana at the age of six, I would imagine my future in the eyes of strangers, people I met on the street or in school, people who didn't look, sound or live anything at all like me and my family. There was one girl in particular whom I chose to emulate, a classmate with bushy brown hair and skin the color of a newly turned autumn leaf. Her image and presence are still caged in the depths of my memory; only her name has escaped.

I would beg my mother to buy me clothes that I had seen this girl wear. I would tease and coerce my hair into styles similar to hers. Each time she spoke, I memorized her colloquialisms, her inflections, the way she stretched her vowels so that their sounds remained suspended in mid-air even after she had stopped talking. I wanted to know her world; this was the most direct route my child-mind found to arrive at a place, that specific place, of belonging. And because, like most children, I did not know how to belong in and to several places at once, that arrival also signaled a departure.

The process of leaving behind one's beginnings is always bittersweet. It is the bare-boned excitement of a new discovery cloaked with the burden of



In rehearsal. Photos by Jay Thompson.

shame. It is the line of demarcation between happiness and horror, the moment you realize that your loyalties are colliding, that the person you love best in one setting is the person who brings you the most embarrassment in another. And, inevitably, that person ends up being a member of your own family.

While growing up, both my mother and my father took equal albeit involuntary turns being that person. I would dread bumping into friends when I was out and about with either of my parents. They both clung to Ghanaian culture too tightly for my newly Americanized taste. Their jewelry, their clothing; hearing the uncontrived way in which they spoke English made me cringe. It was all well and good behind the closed-door comfort of our home but, in public, it just wouldn't do. I no longer wanted to recognize myself in them. But, of course, I always did. I had to. They held the key that I needed to unlock the door to my past. And there, pressed in the palms of that past, were all the necessary tools to harvest my ripening individuality. The only way I could move forward was by reaching back.

Sometime last year, I stopped at a grocery store to pick up a few items and, as I entered, I noticed that a woman standing in the queue at the check-out register was closely watching me. She was wearing jeans, a plain white tee shirt and Air Jordans. Her hair was braided in extended corn rows. Despite her "all-Black-American" appearance, I could tell that she was not from this country. It was in the way she stood, the way she stared. Her face was dark and chiseled — unmistakably West African — like mine, like the faces of my aunts and cousins. We could have easily been kin.

Her shopping cart was brimmed with food: bags of rice, peanut butter jars, boxes of mashed potato mix, a package of ox tails, fresh fish wrapped in stark white paper, spinach, onions, eggplants, potatoes. I could guess the meals that would be prepared with the groceries she was buying, meals my mother used to cook for us — groundnut soup, or kontumare with fufu — meals I loved.

When I passed by this woman, she looked directly at me. It seemed that she, too, could tell that I was not what I seemed. "How are you?," she said. There was a rich familiarity in her voice. Her accent was thick and guttural. I knew then that she was definitely a Ghanaian. I opened my mouth and responded. "I'm fine. And you?" My accent, clearly East Coast American.

"Oh," she said through a slight grin of embarrassment, "I thought you were somebody I knew. It is just that you look like...uh, well, pardon the mistake." I could see that she was disappointed and, reluctantly, I was too. I knew that she wanted my voice to echo the call of home, to offer her some sort of remembrance or reunion. I considered telling the woman that she had not made a mistake. I wanted desperately to be able to say: *I am who you think I am*. But I did not, because it wouldn't have been as simple as that. I knew that such statements only prompted questions. Questions that would challenge the authenticity of my Africanness: *Where were you born? What happened to your accent? Do you even speak any of our languages? Why are you so American?* Questions that I do not yet know the answers to. What did happen to my accent? Why am I so American?

Without another word to the woman, I turned and walked away; I disappeared into the crowd and wandered through the aisles of the store in much the same way as I have wandered through the margins of this country — wide-eyed and awkwardly — trying all too hard not to get lost. But I carried her gaze with me. And it filled me with such joy and freedom because I suddenly realized that no matter what direction I chose or where my journeys landed me, someone or something would always cross my path and lead me back home.

— MERI NANA-AMA DANQUAH is a poet, fiction writer, freelance journalist and frequent contributor to the Taper programs.