

Jones, Kendra
Dear Mama – An Artistic Statement

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By Kendra Jones

Abstract

Dear Mama is a new one-act play written by Kendra Jones, which premiered with Impel Theatre as part of Royal Manitoba Theatre Centre's Sondheimfest in January 2013. The play pays homage to the classic stage mother in *Gypsy* while making reference to contemporary child performers. Also inspired by Sondheim's lyrics in *Gypsy*, this new piece delves into the mind and body of a girl obsessed with fame, beauty and attention, teaching that words have the power to build you up or tear you down. Produced by Impel Theatre, *Dear Mama* was directed by Megan Andres, with design and dramaturgy by Megan Andres, movement by Kendra Jones, stage management by Leah Borchert and sound by John Norman.

Date: January 17-20 2013

Location: Studio 320 Winnipeg - Impel Theatre for Royal Manitoba Theatre Centre's SondheimFest

Production: Dear Mama by Kendra Jones

Director: Megan Andres

Cast: Kendra Jones

The intent of this little piece was to cause friction. I believe fully that our role as artists is to awaken our audience to an awareness of a part of existence they had heretofore been unaware of, or simply ignoring. I began writing *Dear Mama* as a response to what I see all around us; as a mother and a theatre educator of children, I am regularly confronted with the way popular culture promotes a sexualized understanding of femininity and womanhood, and imposes it on girls at an increasingly young age. To propose that as a society we are ignoring the sexualization of little girls is not only simplistic, it is untrue. However despite all of the awareness in certain circles, we do not talk about this issue nearly enough. It is this lack of conversation, the lack of acknowledgement that we don't actually have all of the answers, but need to start talking about what they might be, that drove me to write and perform *Dear Mama*. I wanted to spark this conversation with the audience, and between audience members. The resulting piece features a woman, Ruby, who is seen overlapping across three periods of her life, three versions of herself. Young Ruby is aged six, new to the performing game and eager to please everyone, particularly her overbearing mother. Grand Dame Ruby, as she became known, is Ruby at 66, the faded star doing her rounds on the casino or comedy circuit, playing the only shtick she knows - her power over men. And finally, Ruby, aged 18. This is the truthful self; uncertain, self-deprecating, spiteful, and ill at ease. The self no one else sees.

My very first images of Ruby were of a grown woman who had always been told she was a star, but truthfully had not actually been. She lived her whole life puffed up on the words of others in a cloud of narcissism, praise, and falsity. We see her broken and unable to cope with the realization too late in life that no one actually cared for her. The version of Ruby who remains after the development of *Dear Mama* still values herself only in the eyes of others. Their laughter, their applause, their silence, drive her every movement.

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Figure 1: Kendra Jones as Ruby, *Dear Mama* Directed by Megan Andres, January 2013 at Studio 320. Photo: Leif Norman

From here, the parallels began to emerge, and I began to align Ruby with contemporary figures in the news, celebrities, and historical figures. The most prominent of these was Gypsy Rose Lee, the performer made famous through burlesque, but who had actually begun performing as a child vaudevillian. Her story, immortalized through the musical *Gypsy* (LeRoy 1962) has become a regular part of contemporary history; yet this story of the rags to riches girl is troubling. Her success is achieved only through the domineering spirit of her overbearing mother, and her ultimate decision (and willingness) to take her clothes off for fame. *Gypsy* may be one of the more prominent and extreme of such stories, but she along with her sister June are by no means the only child stars to have lived such a childhood. Reading *Gypsy's* biographies, the invented persona and its related history - of which no one really knows what is truth and what is fiction - I was struck by the overwhelming loneliness that for me seems to lie at the core of such an existence. Always on show for the public as the 'perfect' child, even as an adult *Gypsy's* myth of herself rendered hers the 'perfect' troubled childhood, the grain of truth lying somewhere beneath.



Figure 2: Kendra Jones as Ruby, *Dear Mama* Directed by Megan Andres, January 2013 at Studio 320. Photo: Leif Norman

Once again, the connections sparked, this time to contemporary images. Television today is filled with performing children; there are the standard 'Disney starlets', the young Vanessa Hudgens and iCarly types who tabloids anxiously

await growing up to be the Lindsay Lohans and Miley Cyruses of tomorrow. These have existed for years, and arguably are no different from the young Shirley Temple or Drew Barrymore. Some get through and go on to successful careers as adults, while others struggle and falter when the adoration disappears, spiraling into drugs and other dangerous behavior. A rare few manage to retreat to a quiet life outside the spotlight. Regardless of the details of their specific experiences, there is in these cases a perceived distinction between their self as performer on stage or screen, and their actual self who eats dinner with mom and dad. What today's television programs offer, though, is an even more frightening group, strikingly like Gypsy herself; the *Toddlers and Tiaras*, *John & Kate + 8*, and *Dance Moms* set, for whom real life and performing life is intertwined and blurred. Their characters are their own selves, or some version of themselves, the dubious distinction lost in their own celebrity. When we see these kids having their conversations with Mom, their troubling moments of personal growth, or even something as simple as eating dinner, the level of voyeurism is off the charts. The private has become the public. Everything is on display and open for consumption. These children have become commodities, whose trade value is inherently linked to their continued ability to perform. What will happen when they stop?

This phenomenon permeates every aspect of daily life. It isn't only celebrities who have this public audience for their daily activity, but regular children and teens are increasingly public through social media like Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, Instagram, and others. Anyone can be the next sensation, so long as they are willing to distinguish themselves from the pack, and increasingly for young girls the golden ticket to attention is through sexualization. Cases grow increasingly extreme; young girls posting

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provocative photos, 'selfies' in their underwear, 'sexting', and in the worst cases such as Canadian teen Amanda Todd (for more about Amanda Todd's tragic story visit www.amandatoddlegacy.com), committing suicide as a result of the prolonged negative attention from such behavior. *Dear Mama* provokes the acknowledgement that each and every one of us has responsibility to stop this vulnerability of our young girls, 'The themes of exploitation and dependence here are relevant and provocative - but also make for an (intentionally) uncomfortable and sombre theatre experience' (Schmidt 2013).

These youngest, most vulnerable girls drove the creation of the character Young Ruby, aged six. A six year old will generally do what their parents say, idolizing their parents and the desires imposed by them. So when a young child on a show like *Toddlers and Tiaras* is asked to do a specific dance or wear a specific costume, they say yes. And when the parents encourage or allow a provocative costume for halloween, telling the child they look cute or pretty, the child feeds on this praise. They say they like the costume or outfit or dance. But do they? How could they know any different, when the very people who should be supporting and protecting them are advocating dangerous behavior such as sexualized dance moves or suggestive clothing? Within *Dear Mama*, we see flashbacks to Young Ruby practicing her dance steps, and in one scene rehearsing a commercial. Duly performing the prescribed gestures, she throws a strap off her shoulder 'accidentally on purpose', then giggles and fixes it. In our audience talkbacks following each show, several people commented that this scene was the most real, and the most challenging - to see this happening, and feel as though they should do something to stop it, yet feeling unable to do so due to the conventions of the theatre.



Figure 3: Kendra Jones as Ruby, *Dear Mama* Directed by Megan Andres, January 2013 at Studio 320. Photo: Leif Norman

This discomfort was a major aspect of the design for our creation. Megan Andres (Director & Dramaturge on the original production) and I agreed that the

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audience needs to feel uncomfortable about the subject matter, else we would be doing it a disservice as artists. Inspired by ideas present since Brecht, we aimed to distance the audience, aimed to avoid, 'one common artistic bloomer, that of trying to carry people away' (Brecht 1964). The 'real' news reports of young girls suicides. Seeing little girls in highly sexualized halloween costumes and the like makes the majority of us feel mildly uncomfortable. However this discomfort quickly turns to rage at the perceived perpetrators of the situation; the boy who shared the photo, the irresponsible parent, or 'society'. This obfuscation serves only to allow us a path to the moral high ground. We criticize the story in the news, and then we turn on the reality TV show or buy the gossip magazine, or go see the performance of the star past her prime. With *Dear Mama*, one of our main tactics in drawing awareness to the discussion was 'implicating the audience as voyeur' (Robinson 2013) - to make the audience feel they were voyeurs, and helpless at that. Challenging them to consider what role they played in allowing this to happen around them daily, including acts as simple as turning on the TV to select a channel, or buying a ticket to a performance. Again, this proved successful, as the nature of the individual's participation in voyeurism in popular culture became a focal point in the audience discussions, as well as several reviews of the piece.

Dear Mama focuses on Ruby, a performer not on stage, but in a shabby living room. She is, nonetheless, performing. The set was selected for its simplicity, signifying the potentially dual space of public and private action; these most private acts of self, these private moments of self doubt and choice are blurred as public-private self merges. Ruby is performing, seemingly for an audience signified through the laugh track, however as the play continues, the laugh track subsides, and the realization sets in that Ruby was not actually performing for anyone, leaving the possibility that she in fact never did. Was Ruby's past as performer a delusion? If so, was all of it, or just part of it? Regardless of what actually occurred, what is clear is that her self worth lies outside herself, constantly searching for validation externally.



Figure 4: Kendra Jones as Ruby, *Dear Mama*
Directed by Megan Andres, January 2013 at
Studio 320. Photo: Leif Norman

The work in *Dear Mama* is a jumping off point. It proposes not to offer answers, but to provoke a conversation about women, particularly young women, and sexuality, with the hope that by increasing awareness of our own participation

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and responsibility in this phenomenon, we can begin to alter the pattern. The three versions of selfhood we see in the characters of *Dear Mama* are magnifications of the situation many women and girls face today, and if we can help one another alleviate this pressure to value oneself only in the eyes of others, even just a little, we will all be in a better place. Certainly, a more positive environment in which our young women can be nurtured and flourish, rather than be confronted with feelings of inadequacy and despair.

References

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Biography

Kendra Jones is an instructor at the University of Winnipeg and Prairie Theatre Exchange School, where she directs the Junior Company. She is a graduate of the University of Winnipeg's BA Honors program, where she received the University Gold Medal, and more recently a graduate with Distinction of the MA Text & Performance at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art and Birkbeck College University of London in England. Based in Winnipeg, Canada, her work mingles in the grey area between theatrical performance and performance art, working as an independent director and performer, as well as with her own company, Impel Theatre.