



A Table Well Set: Celebrating Life at the Fountain

FEATURES by [Janet Thielke](#) | February 17, 2010

***The Ballad of Emmett Till*, opens Feb. 20; plays Thurs.-Sat., 8 pm; Sun., 2 pm; through March 20. Tickets: \$18-\$28. The Fountain Theatre, 5060 Fountain Ave., Los Angeles; 323.663.1525 or fountaintheatre.com.**

There are many beautiful moments iconic to the civil rights movement: Martin Luther King delivering his immortal speech; Jackie Robinson swinging away; Rosa Parks sitting resolutely in the front of the bus. But behind each of these moments, behind their illustrious representation of the power of the human spirit, exists the memory of the horror and brutality of racism. One such episode of horrific racism was the murder of Emmett Till, whose story is currently being reclaimed in *The Ballad of Emmett Till* at the Fountain Theatre.



Ifa Bayeza

“The story of Emmett Till is an iconic, almost a sacred story in African American modern culture,” explains playwright Ifa Bayeza. “He was a black youth who journeyed to Mississippi in 1955 for a summer working vacation. He whistled at a white store clerk and was subsequently brutally tortured, murdered and sunk in the river.”

With the shock and anger inspired by Till’s murder, however, the civil rights movement gained new momentum. Till’s mother insisted on turning a personal tragedy into a demand for change. “His mother insisted he have an open casket funeral. At the funeral 50,000 mourners spontaneously appeared. It was a watershed moment for the resistance to white Jim Crow terrorism in the south.”

This isn’t the playwright’s first time focusing on such watershed moments. “One of my areas of focus as an artist is chronicling black resistance to enslavement and discrimination,” says Bayeza. “I tend to look at some critical

intersections of race in our history and what that collision or combination has meant in the making of our nation, the making of our national psyche and our culture.” These works include *Amistad Voices*, the story of a mutiny on a slave ship, and now *The Ballad of Emmett Till*, which premiered at the Goodman Theatre in May 2008 and won the 2008 Mystery Writers of America Edgar Award for Best Play.

Bayeza’s connection to historical moments in the civil rights movement is based on a personal bond with the era and subject matter. “*Ballad* wound up being my effort to chronicle the emotional journey of people like myself who were children of the civil rights movement. Emmett had just turned 14 and so my identification with the story was child to child. While the saga of Emmett Till has been told in several other forms, there have been very different treatments of Emmett himself and the role that he as a youth played as an agent of social change. Since I was on the front lines of the moment of integration, I felt a kinship with him.”



Lorenz Arnell as Emmett Till

This sense of kinship expanded and grew the more Bayeza learned. She did extensive research, including interviewing people who had contact with Emmett himself or lived in Mississippi or Chicago at the same time. “Once I got into the research, I discovered he was such an incredibly unique - kind of an ordinary unique - character that I simply became enamored with him and wanted to share my discoveries with the rest of the world.”

The process of writing the play, however, would be a saga of its own. Bayeza laughingly confesses she has been working on this play since the early '90s and that it has seen a wide variety of drafts and incarnations. Bayeza sees the time and effort put into the play as evidence of the massiveness and importance of Emmett’s story. “I don’t normally do (take that long) but in this case the more I discovered the more I was forced to challenge my own effort and say it’s not good enough, it’s not really right. Even this incarnation at the Fountain is a very different play from the world premiere I did at the Goodman in 2008.”

Here the conversation turns, sadly and inevitably, towards Bennett Bradley and, sadly and inevitably, Bayeza sighs at the mention of his name. “Oh, Ben was such a sweetheart.”

Ben Bradley, beloved member of the Fountain family, was murdered at the beginning of the year. Noted also for his kindness and generosity, his fondness for cooking and willingness to help out anywhere in the theatre, his friends and co-workers agree he was passionate about this play. It was largely through his efforts and encouragement that Bayeza altered the show to fit the intimate Fountain space.

“He was so passionate and committed to this piece. Back in 2006, 2005, I think, when I finally figured out the primary structure of the play, I asked a friend if he would get a couple of actors together when I came out to LA so I could just hear it. I got out there and, much to my surprise, my friend had gotten Ben to offer the Fountain Theatre for the reading. I thought we were going to be in somebody’s living room; instead we were in this beautiful, intimate space.”

Bradley was on her side from the first time he heard the play: “After the reading that evening Ben stood up and said, ‘Anytime you want to work on this play, consider the Fountain your home.’ I said ‘Wow, that’s great...but I live in Chicago!’”

Although unable to take Bradley up on his offer at the time, she says he made certain to keep tabs on the play through its premiere and subsequent incarnations. “When it was at the Goodman (Bradley) was calling an actor in the cast asking how’s it going, what’s the impression.”

After the Goodman premiere, Bayeza began considering how she could reduce the piece to fit a smaller space. For the Goodman show, she had been focusing on getting the full story of Emmett Till in all its complexity and different voices. The result: a 13 person play that was “stuffed like a sausage.” While satisfied with the breadth the play covered, Bayeza felt the need to strip it down, particularly after Emmett Till’s memory was again challenged.

“The cemetery where Emmett’s casket was interred was devastated by this scheme of modern day grave robbers to empty the graves and resell the plots,” she says. “And so all of the ashes of people’s beloveds were thrown into the dump and Emmett’s casket was left out in the elements to rot. This casket was such an important artifact as well as the final resting place of someone who was beloved by millions of people.”

Her personal outrage over the event inspired her to take another look at the play. “It was such a discomfort in my gut hearing that his memory was, in a way, violated again. I felt the need to speak to that outrage and to the kind of desperation I was feeling. So the landscape of the play for me became much harsher and empty. Where I had originally perceived the story as taking place in the netherworld, it shrank down to the tightness of a coffin. When that happened, all these other things flew away.”

The speed with which the play went from reading to revision to restaging also flew. “I called Ben and I said, ‘Ben, I have this idea, this concept, that I can do it with five people.’ He said, ‘Five people! Are you serious? Come on in!’”

She describes the rest falling into place with flawless speed and precision as Bradley took his place as director. “I came out November 23rd to do a reading and after that the project moved like one of those Japanese bullet trains. Ben conferred with Steven Sachs, Simon Levy and Deborah Lawlor. And they decided on December 5th, Emmett’s birthday, to greenlight the project. It was just wild; I’ve never seen anything happen that fast.”

Everything went flawlessly and fast, that is, until the New Year. “We did the first readthrough on December the 28th or 29th. I had some more work to do but Ben said ‘Take New Year’s off and we’ll talk on Monday.’ And, of course, New Year’s day he was murdered.”

What followed was the very difficult task of picking up the pieces, mourning a friend and director while trying to continue on with the play. Bradley’s absence was a tragic, sudden and gaping wound in the rehearsal room. “But,” insists Bayeza, “his urgency and his passion for the work are palpable in every way in the production we’re doing.”

While Bradley could not be replaced, his role as director needed to be filled immediately to meet the February 20th opening. Besides needing a brilliant director with a specific artistic vision, the cast needed a leader to help them through their loss and guide them to eventual success.



Shirley Jo Finney

Enter Shirley Jo Finney.

“Ben passed away on the first, I got a call on the second, I was in the rehearsal hall on the third,” says Finney. “They asked me to take over the show and because of my 12 year association with the Fountain Theatre, I couldn’t say no to them in their time of need. I just think they’re a great group of people. I call them my theatre home.”

“Shirley Jo has come in and done just a brilliant job,” says Bayeza. “She’s a very powerful force and she’s an associate of the Fountain. Because of the trauma it was important for them to not only get an excellent director but someone who could be an emotional comfort and grounding.”

From the beginning, Finney has offered that comfort and grounding. “It was a terrible loss for the whole Fountain family and the cast,” she sympathizes. “When I came into rehearsal we did rituals. We spent the night in a healing ritual where they got to express and mourn.”

Finney also understood the power of the play and how, combined with their own recent experience with violence against someone they loved, the horror of the story might be overwhelming for the actors. “At different times in the process, everyone has dealt with it differently but we’ve dealt with it together,” she says.

And she’s a big believer in the supposed best medicine: “We did a lot of laughing. If you had walked into a rehearsal hall, you wouldn’t have thought (the play) was that serious. I kept the rehearsal room very easy and fluid and we laughed our way knowing there was a tension point.

Laughter is such a healing tool. We had fun, and the closer we got to the more dramatic points, the more we laughed so we could go in and come out of the scene.”

By the end of their rehearsal period, the cast and crew’s shared sense of loss had united them and inspired them to perform the play in his memory. “(His death) created for them a tighter bond,” says Finney. “And we’ve moved forward from it.”

Still, moving forward was far from an easy task for a director, even one as skilled as Finney, when there was little time to prepare. “With this particular play, I have been flying by the seat of my pants,” she says. “Usually you know what you’re going to do six months, a year out. And so you have a lot of time to research and massage and nurture, to create a language with your writer and design team and actors. This time I’ve really had to rely on my short hand of the 30 years I’ve been directing.”



Rico E. Anderson, Karen Malina White and Bernard Addison

Such a short hand for Finney always includes an emphasis on the emotional journey of a given piece. “When I approach a work, I really look at the humanity,” she says, an intention that nicely parallels Bayeza’s vision.

“She understands my world of work. I’ve wanted to work with Shirley Jo for a number of years but we could never find that moment,” says Bayeza. “So it’s kind of like the play and the project chose the best person to deliver it at this juncture.”

While Finney similarly puts importance on research, she also believes what happens in the theatre in the moment takes precedence: “It doesn’t matter if it’s a period piece because each story is our story - we’re always dealing with the human experience. The mind, body, spirit of each person and their behavior and how we walk and navigate the world. I want the audience to take an emotional journey. I want you to experience things because that’s what I want when I sit in that seat.”

Speaking of those people about to sit in the Fountain’s seats, Bayeza and Finney both have very specific hopes for what the audience can take away from the piece.

Bayeza’s hopes largely depend on the specific audience members, particularly those of her own generation and experience. “For folks who are children of the civil rights movement, I hope the play is a validation of the experience we had. It was a very traumatic experience, being at the front lines of integration, being children who were essentially non-violent foot soldiers. And to a certain extent, a post-traumatic stress went along with that role that was never fully appreciated or acknowledged.”

Bayeza also believes Emmett’s story can speak to the future: “For the general audience, my hope is that the tragedy of Emmett’s death is more emotionally wrenching, more palpable, and shows the general dehumanizing of the African American persons through my portrayal of his life. I hope in trying to fully humanize Emmett that energy will translate to a greater respect for humanity of black folk wherever they are. And for youth, my hope is that by telling Emmett’s story from the point of view of a young person I can create a sense of connection and continuity of history. I hope to suggest for young people today, young men of color that they are in a great peril in a different way because it’s internalized violence, its internalized dehumanization. My hope is it helps them reflect on the beauty, humanity and potential they hold. Their capacity to change their present and make a better future.”

As for what Finney wants the audience to take away, she says simply, “Celebrating life.”

More than celebrating the life of Emmett Till, the play is also a testimony to the man responsible for bringing the show to the Fountain and developing it into its current manifestation. Bradley’s hard work and vision, Bayeza and Finney agree, is very much alive in the play. “Ben loved to cook,” says Bayeza. “So using that analogy: he’s prepared for us a table well set.”

Feature image of Rico E. Anderson, Adenrele Ojo, Bernard Addison, Lorenz Arnell and Karen Malina White and story images by Ed Krieger