Ala Ala! The Self-Love Play: The Creation of A Theatre for the Dreamers

Sondai NaNaBuluku
*Bard College*, sn1249@bard.edu

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Ala Ala! The Self-Love Play: The Creation of A Theatre for the Dreamers

A Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of the Arts
of Bard College

by
Sondai NaNaBuluku

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Dedication/Acknowledgements

I would first like to say that I dedicate the completion of this Senior Project to my family and friends, without whom I would have never moved out of Georgia and all the up to New York let alone complete this work. This play and the work that accompanies it is dedicated to the people that have passed away and the memories that keep them alive every single day. It is important to remember that even if they aren’t here beside us at this moment, they are looking out for you and me all the same and for that I thank all the ancestors that have guided and supported me on this journey as an artist. I would like to also thank my professors as well as my advisors, Jean Wagner & Jonathan Rosenberg officially, and Chiori Miyagawa unofficially. All three of them have challenged me as an artist to articulate what needs to be said and to have faith in myself and for that, I thank the Theatre and Performance Department, especially these three professors. I would be absolutely remiss if I did not thank The Old Gym and the heads of the space. The space is a wonderful part of the Bard community and it was a joy celebrating it with everyone! I would like to thank my wonderful cast and crew, without whom, the show would have never succeeded. Thank you all for your lovely spirits and positivity as we developed this lovely little show into the ritualistic experience that it has become. Lastly, I would like to highlight my brother, Ajani NaNaBuluku, specifically for providing all of the audio that brings the piece together and for showing his little brother that you too can follow your own dreams no matter what. Love you big bro.
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My journey as an artist began with joy and exhilaration, the feeling that I was carving out a little groove in the world situated for me and only me. Along the way, I learned a few lessons. One of which being that dreams don’t offset the harsh realities of capitalist America. I witnessed my father, a proud owner of two college degrees, lying in a hospital bed because of illness, hungry because food stamps were being held up, and prideless because the next paycheck wasn’t coming. I would tell my dad through these experiences that I wanted to be a writer, to make stories that would illustrate what our lives entailed in this world. I told my dad this because this was my heartfelt dream. Even in the deep darkness that is poverty, that is hopelessness, my dad never demeaned or made me compromise this dream. “Go for it son. Prove that this is your dream.” A play that would illustrate not only that you should follow dreams passionately but a play that would shed light on the reasons for why you should be doing it. That was how I would prove it. It is not despite poverty or fear for your livelihood that you should pursue your dreams but it is because of these aspects of life that you should chase these dreams. That is the spiritual essence that brought me to the writer’s table to prove it. That is the essence that in time brought forth *Ala Ala! The Self-Love Play*.

This project means carving my name alongside the great writers of theatrical history such as Adrienne Kennedy, Lennox Brown and many many more. My challenge was not against these writers but for myself to rise to the occasion, to these aforementioned standards of theatrical skill. A few of my questions were related to feelings of utter isolation/depression, hatred against Black boys in America systematically speaking and the existential meanings of life through all of these previously mentioned tensions. What is the reason for going on living if this is the reality of Black boys in America let alone the rest of the world? Seeing the hardships of my father during the summer, the moment of creating *Ala Ala!*, made this journey more urgent.
because I felt that even in his forties my father felt this pressure and uncertainty. I was sure that if I didn’t solve this problem then I too would feel these pressures and uncertainties at my father’s age. It became our “what’s the point” moment and I did what I always do when met with those sorts of moments. I wrote and when writing I came to two realizations. The first realization being that my father was depressed because of the circumstances we were placed in during the summer and the second realization being that I could hear my brother’s music playing in his room.

I understood that music, specifically the music made by my older brother, would serve as the glue that held this play together and that now the bones of this creation were beginning to form. My brother and I grew up together in every faucet of the word. We have never really been separated and the longest time apart for us was only about two - three months when he was away in college and I was in high school. I believe that I took that connection for granted in my younger years. Listening to his music at the time reconnected those bonds that have always been there but that for me I took for granted and I wanted audience members to feel that through the same medium that I did, his music. With the bones now clearly forming within this creation, I began to wonder how will I add flesh into this structure? What will provide substance to this theatrical experience?

The canon that we often sift our way through has become a White man’s showcase with very few people of color and women being highlighted especially in the theatrical arts. This fact was not lost on me during the writing process for Ala Ala! I felt that I needed to delve deeper into the Black aesthetics that I wasn’t being taught at Bard in order to make this show everything that it could be and more and that is why I began my search for substance with the Black Arts Movement. This was a movement devoted to the creation and the full embrace of an authentic Black identity in America, an identity that would lead our people toward some fundamental
truths in the world. “. . . black anguish becomes committed to the human laws of so-called universal truths,” (Harrison, “Kuntu Drama” 3). While I agreed with this statement, I was curious what this term, universal truths, meant and what lens was used to evaluate something so formative to a human experience. I began to understand that these universal truths are being described in a Euro-centric White, oftentimes cis-male, narrative not by the standards of African people in America let alone any other group in the mix. What often ends up happening because of Theatre’s devotion to this outdated canon is that the Black experience in America is second to a White experience and the few Black artists that make it into said canon will simply serve as surface level novelty rather than a stick to your ribs African experience (Harrison, “Kuntu Drama” 6). With this, I understood that however my play took shape I could not surrender Black aesthetics, Black experiences or Black vernacular language/terminology no matter what. This play would need to serve as an assertion of a Black identity in America, America for the piece being Bard college.

I set up tenants that I would have to follow when it came to writing Ala Ala! in order to create the politically focused piece that I sought to create. It’s important to understand that most Black works in America, whether it be Lorraine Hansberry’s A Raisin in the Sun or August Wilson’s Fences, address revolution, A change for the better. When Woodie King Jr. brought together Black plays in his anthology New Plays from the Black Theatre he immediately highlighted this point stating that “The politics of Black theatre is a cry for change and for all that that means, whether we are on a university campus, in a non-profit resident theatre, or on Broadway.” Change must be present in multiple facets because space is revolutionary for Black people, people of color as well, in this country. I believe that this is largely because of the validation of the aforementioned Theatre canon by predominantly White institutions. What this meant to me as a playwright is that the spaces being birthed in Ala Ala! should be spaces
developed for Black characters without the weight of Whiteness suffocating them. My characters needed to move in their own freedom in order to properly embrace the trauma of a Black identity but also in order to properly embrace the joys of it as well. I also learned, once again in a different way this time, that a little music wouldn’t hurt either.

As I mentioned before, I knew very early on that music would play an integral part in my play. Kuntu Drama reinforced this artistic choice when discussing Amiri Baraka’s *Slaveship*.

“Imamu Amiri Baraka’s *Slaveship* on paper, is a mere few pages in which scenes, some dialogue and some type of activity occur. With deft manipulation/orchestration the desired rhythm is induced to amplify *Slaveship* at its most sensate level of experience,” (Harrison, “Kuntu Drama” 25).

An aural experience provides the rhythm that Paul Carter Harrison finds so intriguing in *Slaveship* but what would the aural experience of *Ala Ala!* sound like and how do I achieve such a thing? I always thought back to my family’s depressive state, to the severe poverty and hopelessness, and remember hearing my brother’s music playing in the next room. The aural experience that I sought to share with the audience was a familial one. I wanted it to be one that pulled us out of the pits of hopelessness and told us with a boisterous voice that what you’re trying to do in the world is something that only you can make happen. “Go for it son. Prove it.” These are the spirits that echoed in my head, in my soul, when addressing an aural quality in this work but now the challenge lies with how do you open this up to everyone?

There is a Ghanian word called Sankofa and it means in order to move forward you have to look to the past. For me, this meant I had to go digging in some older crates my dad had lying around reading plays from the likes of Ben Caldwell, Pearl Cleage and Richard Wesley just to name a few. These playwrights were unapologetic in the employment of Black aesthetics on stage, they had clarity, something that I’ve been told several times that I lack but, to me, that never felt like what made these playwrights and their plays special. Each of these writers was
capable of bringing forth this energy, this wave of a traditional spirit into American work. It almost felt like it was the introduction of some foreign yet familiar essence into American work. How could I do the same? Would it be possible to bring the “OUH-AAH OUH-AAH OUH-AHH,” (Harrison “The Drama of Nommo” xiii), rhythms, cadences and spirits of the ancestors into my little senior project?

Theatre was beginning to sound like some sort of spiritual experience or something. Well to me this was very quickly becoming a search for spiritual existential understanding of the Black cis-male self; the “what does it mean to walk in the flesh I walk in” sort of search that inevitably became connected to an Ifá conception of awo. “In traditional Yoruba culture, awo refers to the hidden principles that explain the Mystery of Creation and Evolution . . . anything which can be known by the intellect alone ceases to be awo,” (Fatunmbi 2). Although there is no real translation for this concept, the author of this book settles for the word secret which feels fitting to me. A search for existential understanding, the truth of life, has always felt elusive and frustrating ever since I had my first conscious thought so of course this truth must be secret, must be a part of awo. Another Yoruba concept stuck to my ribs as I began pulling my hair out over my own existential failings over the course of my twenty-two, at that point twenty-one, year life. The concept of ìwa-pèlé, the development of good character.

Good character in the Ifá mindset, at least to my understanding, has always meant a sort of natural harmonious truth within oneself in relation to the world around them. A connection to the past as well as the present in order to move forward toward a pleasant future that you are fighting for but how is this done practically/traditionally in Ifá? People must strive to grasp good character through connection to the world around them yet the people have no idea how to achieve this lofty goal. Well “Ifá teaches that it is possible to connect with both Orisha (Forces in Nature) and Egun (ancestors) through the disciplined use of dreams,” (Fatunmbi 22).
Dreaming? Surely the answer to existential self worth, and connection to the environment cannot be as “simple” as dreaming. I like to ask sceptics why not? As children, we are filled to the brim with ambitions, hopes and happiness as well as dreams but as we age we grow cynical and abandon the dreams that we aspire toward. We say things like, “they aren’t realistic,” or “nobody believes in me so I should just quit anyway.” I started thinking about how controversial dreaming and having dreams really was for people in our day and age and came to another realization. Dreaming is in fact hard. In this vein, it’s important to understand that this whole process is in order to realize that we as people are more connected than we could ever imagine. Dreaming in the context of striving to grab hold of your goals/aspirations is not a solitary experience even if it feels like it might be.

“In African thought, the dead are considered active members of the human community as long as they can be personified by memory,” (Harrison “The Drama of Nommo” 29). You will always have someone rooting for you and your aspirations. Dreaming is as astounding as it is fun because the act of bringing your dreams into fruition is a supernatural act assisted by those who have passed away. It’s a political act because you have claimed your stake in the world, carved out a little groove for you and only you. I learned that the Yoruba word for dream is “ala”. I also learned that the repetition of this word in the word alala, meaning dreamer, is an expression believing that dreams can access the origin of our inner thoughts (Fatunmbi 22 - 23). Dreams are important. The supernatural act of taking the abstract thoughts, goals and even feelings and bringing them into reality on earth in the here and now. wanted to take this lesson and put it front and center on this now existential play. I think I was obsessed with this idea because my father has taught me that it’s important to look at titles and ask yourself what they really mean. If your title can’t accomplish this, then your work is already failing itself. That’s why I began by naming this play Ala Ala! I’ve come to terms with the fact that people believe
passionately that dreams serve no real life, concrete or tangible, purpose, there are no earthly consequences that come from the act of dreaming. I understand that what I propose artistically can be a hard pill to swallow but I also can’t help but wonder that if dreams are devices that connect something abstract within a person, whether you believe that they connect you to God, the ancestors or whatever it still connects you to something, then there has to be some sort of real world consequences from the act of dreaming.

I’m beginning to think that plays are like dreams. Think about it like this. On paper, plays are words on a page that “serve no real life purpose” or “have no earthly consequences”, but is that really all that they amount to? I had to start considering theatre in a spiritual manner which is why I started learning about preaching and preachers. In the play *The Gospel At Colonus*, the story of Oedipus is told; The Oedipus myth is the text being preached with; however, this is not what makes *The Gospel at Colonus* work. The play states that in order for the preacher role to be successful one has to understand just what it means to be a Black preacher. It states that “The black preacher not only has to know the script. He had to be able to make the story come alive while at the same time sticking with the story because the folks he was preaching to also knew the story,” (Breuer xiii). Preaching is the act of bringing the intangible, the word of God or a writer, into the tangible realities of our world through performance. This traditional Black artform, preaching in this specific way, is why *The Gospel at Colonus* excels beyond a mere recontextualization of the story of Oedipus. The art of preaching in the Black community has, much like dreaming, been a politically urgent act that if done correctly reshapes what the world around us looks like. A practice that can help others comprehend the awo around us all.

“The preacher stood waiting for the song to melt away. There was a moment of abysmal silence, into which the thousand blasphemies filtering in from outside dropped unheeded . . . He
stood motionless then repeated in a whisper, lugubrious, hoarse, almost inaudible: ‘In hell–’ paused, then without warning, wildly shrieked, ‘In hell!’ (Harrison “The Drama of Nommo” 80 - 81). A command of language and words, a dexterity with the energy within the room and a dexterity to look you in the eye and see exactly who you are. I believe that to a community this is what it looks like to be a proper preacher especially for Black folks. It made sense to me after reading these books that Ala Ala! had to put a preacher front and center. To the Black community in America, a preacher has served as an oratorical role model for the entire community. Historically speaking, we’ve seen it with churches and preachers during the Civil Rights Movement. These oftentimes male figures father the community in order to educate and uplift a new generation at risk in America.

The common opinion against Black boys has always been that there aren’t any fathers in households. Fathering cannot just be the job of community leaders but must also happen in more intimate spaces. If you believe that this is the total truth of young Black boys in America, that there aren’t fathers in households, then you are not very aware of your surroundings. Growing up in Atlanta for as long as I did, I met many Black boys in my life with wonderful fathers who molded them into who they are as men today. I do also understand that these aren’t everyone’s circumstances, of course they aren’t everyone’s circumstances after all, but I wanted to unpack what a proper dad looks like on stage especially a Black dad. We are also often told that Black boys almost never excel academically, the “if only other boys were as smart as your son” speech by teachers, or that Black boys are threatening to the world around them, gang violence, violent crimes and what not. Turn on the news and watch for a second and see what I’m referring to. I didn’t feel the need to find sources that proved this phenomena because I remember waking up before school and turning on the news to see Black boys that looked just like my brother and me going to jail, getting killed or abandoning their families. The
consumption of this toxic narrative was my daily breakfast from elementary school to high school in Georgia.

It is no wonder that Black boys feel pressured from a society that feels this way about your existence and your right to space, the classic “this world doesn’t owe you shit” way of thinking. These aren’t new problems. Back in the early-mid eighties, Jawanza Kunjufu, a proud father and writer, wrote a book called *Countering the Conspiracy to Destroy Black Boys* that caught my immediate attention. The book is full of charts and statistics explaining why what we hear is a lie and why reality is being reshaped the way it is for Black boys but I feel that he accomplishes this when describing Male Seasoning. “How can you separate biological theory from the social environment where it is manifested? The myths that African/Americans are lazy, lack initiative, are super sexy, love to dance, sing and play basketball become self-fulfilling if role models and encouragement are not provided . . .” (Kunjufu 18). He goes on to explain that role models must be more than communal teachers and preachers must be placed in multiple facets of a growing boy’s life much as we brought up earlier. Male Seasoning is a validation of societal “norms” being forced on a community and it can be pushed onto a new generation by the older one unintentionally, in fact it often is. Jawanza explains that parents are often perpetrators of these narratives when they force their children to hold certain interests instead of pushing their kids to pursue something that they actually have a stake in, the classic “why aren’t you playing sports with the other boys” example. Generational Male Seasoning gives birth to men who aren’t capable of uplifting a newer generation above the stereotypes that will inevitably be placed on them in order to destroy them.

We as a society have unpacked that the “be a man” statement is quite outdated but it is also a part of Male Seasoning for Black boys. This sort of line of thought creates fathers who lack empathy and become indifferent about the responsibilities of fatherhood; I would argue that this
feeling plays a huge part in the creation of absent fathers in the Black community. This displays that not only is Male Seasoning harmful for the next generation but that it is also dehumanizing for said fathers because they become emotionless skeletons of what they used to be. This emotionlessness can even have long term consequences on their health. “Psychologists have proven that expressing emotions can alleviate suicidal tendencies,” (Kunjufu 24). This quote shows that Male Seasoning has a large factor in destroying young Black boys who in addition to societal pressures to “man up,” must fight the stereotypes against the Black boy in America. This torment then becomes cyclical with the Black boy becoming a burdened Black man who shows the same apathy to the world that his father showed him. Reading *The Conspiracy to Destroy Black Boys* showed me that as an artist once again what you put out into the world does in fact have tangible consequences because we see this happen with the media all of the time. My community has been the victim to stereotypes and Male Seasoning for decades upon decades, till this very day, because of these real world consequences. As a writer I find that everyday I understand the responsibilities that come with being a writer especially because of how young I am now.

I wanted to write a play about growing up as a Black boy in America. This was the experience that I had prior to coming all the way to upstate New York and it was the most formative experience in my life so far but I wanted to approach this with a dramatic sense of responsibility. Ntozake Shange is well known for creating theatre pieces that highlighted the emotional trauma, joys and human experiences of being a Black woman in this country and in this world, (Lester 5), but it is not my place to write a play about that experience as the Black cis-male writer that I am today. As an artist, your identity will shape the world that you have and you must approach work with serene awareness not caution but awareness. Caution births fear and fear in art creates subpar work. Delving into the crates of books that my father had lying
around became a resurrection of what it meant to become a successful writer. I must write stories as honestly as I can possible accomplish in order to empower the next writer to do the same so that we can have world shifting plays about a Black trans identity or a Black female identity or a Black queer identity and so on and so on. If artistic spaces for writers like these are not given, then we will never understand the truths of our world, we will never comprehend the metamorphic awo in our day and age. I have learned, in my four years at Bard College, that concerns in our modern world are as intersectional as they are political. As an artist hoping to advocate for some sort of change, this is a fundamental truth that one needs to understand before bringing anything to an audience’s attention.

There are no tips or tricks for capturing an audience’s attention in my opinion. I believe it comes to an abashed honesty of what the world looks like for you and how things fit into said world. As a writer, I try to improve my skill at this every single time I write anything whether it be for fun or for profit. Paul Carter Harrison brought up a point that Black theatre, traditionally in Africa and contemporarily in America, from the griots of West Africa to the August Wilsons of the 1980s, has been concerned with discovering “universal” truths. This is difficult to manage. We live in a capitalist country where profit is not simply important but the only way to sustain oneself. How do writers in America seeking universal truths put people in seats? Paul Carter Harrison argues that some Black plays such as Howard Sackler’s *The Great White Hope* and the broadway adaptation Ossie Davis’ *Purlie* have been sanitized for White consumership (Harrison “Kuntu Drama” 8 - 9). This is also a part of the realities of being an artist that writes against the grain of the place you’re in. You have to find a way to make your work sustainable; however, it is still important as an artist, I would argue even more so in these circumstances, to make your point, to take your shit.
“From what wellsprings could I draw things that might in fact envelop us in a sense of ourselves that was rooted to the earth, that was not rooted to the idea that white people had about us, that was not rooted to our relationship to white people?” (Lester 13). Honesty is the answer. No one else on this entire planet can tell your story. It is the responsibility of the marginalized, the incriminated and the outcast to tell the story that exposes their truth. Advocates and allies can only do so much but when it concerns the existential self worth of your marginalized identity, the responsibility must fall on you. This has been an idea that I have struggled with since elementary because it seems that those suffering have to always be the ones sacrificing in order to force the world to be reshaped but now I view this responsibility as a means of connecting the dots not suffering. Ntozake Shange must have felt this pressure when she looked out into that broadway audience when *for colored girls who have considered suicide / when the rainbow is enuf* premiered and saw primarily White faces, faces of people she didn’t write this story for, and the absence of Black women in the room (Lester 81). The frustration(s) of being a writer from a community like this one is relatable. I feel that I learned something important about this while producing *Ala Ala!* for the Bard community.

After opening night before the COVID-19 pandemic was in full effect on campus, I received an email from a fellow senior student, a White senior student in my class. In the email, he told me about his mother and the losses that she had in her life. He told me about what losing someone meant for him and his family and how *Ala Ala!* brought that back to his mind in a good way. He told me how the show helped him digest what had happened in his life and for the first time I understood what it meant to achieve the universal through the specific. This authentically Black experience was an extremely personal endeavor for me that could not have been anymore specific without becoming an autobiographical work and yet people outside of this experience connected with it so poignantly. This is the way to put people in seats and fill the room with
people that you intend to be there and for people you may not expect. In Ntozake Shange’s case, accessibility politics were at play and unfortunately these politics haven’t been changed for the better in our day and age but that is no reason to stop writing the truths we have as Black artists. This is a concern, from the writer’s side of things, of balance because as an artist, how do you create work that reflects who you are honestly, the ground from which you have soared, your community and your past, without selling that community out.

The Black narrative historically and otherwise in America has been an extremely personal traumatic one. There is no backing down from this fact. Black bodies were not considered human bodies until the late 1800s. Prior to that our bodies were considered the property of White people and a White government. Institutional hardships continued well into the late 1900s with many folks clutching onto “the good ol’ days” for dear life and the hardships continued on after that well into our modern day era consumed with violence against innocent Black bodies. Existence for Black bodies in this country is painful and traumatic till this very day. Few works illustrate the impact of this existence quite like Samuel Kelly’s *Pill Hill*.

I learned about this play from my father who performed in the show while he was in college and found that simply reading the play was a surprisingly visceral experience. The play is filled with traumatic stories such as getting assaulted by law enforcement, lied to by your White supervisors and fortune turning away from you and your hopes as you’re left poor and homeless. An experience intimately shedding light on the horrors of being Black physically, mentally and emotionally. For this feat, I absolutely applaud Samuel Kelly because he was capable of showing a tension that few contemporary works are capable of to this day. The tension of coming up in the world vs. selling out. There is a moment when two characters, Eddie and Al I believe, return after becoming a lawyer and a real estate agent, two dreams that the men talk about very early on in the play. We learn from the tensions this brings into the room that success for these men is
bittersweet because the perception is that they’ve sold out. They aren’t carving out a path alongside their brothers but instead punched out a crude little hole for them and men like them. This is a complicated tension being brought up because Samuel Kelly doesn’t tell you who is right and who is wrong but merely shows you the realities of what these choices have done to these men. The act of claiming your stake on Pill Hill, a notoriously White neighborhood, is an act of posing as a White man despite the traumatic history you have with said White folk. Pill Hill forces you to address the question of how will you or how have you or how are you rising above the surroundings positioned around you?

“In America, black community life finds itself locked into a mode-referred to as ghettos and inner cities-designated, thus controlled, by whites . . . to manipulate that community in a manner that produces self-destruction . . .” (Harrison “The Drama of Nommo” 3). There is no space for self worth or validation in a society that wants you to be destroyed. We live in a society that wants to see Black boys destroy themselves in a manner similar to Joe in Pill Hill. For people who believe that times have changed, they must be made aware of the realities of Black oppression. It is in the music with works such as Good Kid, M.A.A.D City, it is in contemporary films with works such as Moonlight, and it is in the theatre today with works such as Fairview. This fight against Black bodies and their surroundings is not going anywhere anytime soon and this fact served as the reason for why Ala Ala! must be a fight against the environment that wants you destroyed. It is the reason for why Alala, the dreamer, must revolutionize his mind and turn his self-hatred, his self-destruction, into self-love, something constructive.

It is no secret, nor have I done a good job at hiding it, that I consider myself an idealist. Dreams and passions are what give our lives purpose. Dreams are the things that will always fill us even when the world does want you to destroy yourself. Fighting against oppression is never an easy feat especially when that oppression is institutionally planted in vast communities
including your own; however, this is work of the utmost importance and when writing *Ala Ala!* I learned this lesson as well. The creation of work such as this play is the manifestation of the revolutionary act of enacting your dreams, following the passions we have as people who walk the globe. I believe this claim with a fervent zeal. The creation of *Ala Ala!* serves as the answer to a question I asked when I first went back home to write this play. Why should I be on the planet? I was interested in a journey that would end with me writing a good play but the journey became a quest of existential understanding of who I am and what I really want from this world. For me, this work became a journey of understanding what self love really meant and in the midst of this journey I listened to my brother’s album *The Self-Love Tape*. This album in turn gave birth to the work that would become *Ala Ala! The Self-Love Play*, a promise that I would stake my claim in this world that wants boys like me destroyed alongside the community that birthed me. I hoped and continue to hope that this love I felt when writing this play and listening to this album are spread through to people especially young struggling Black boys.

Once the script was finally completed, I had to face the brand new challenge of putting this creation on its feet which was not at all a simple thoughtless act. The first hurdle in the journey was simply getting enough actors to take part in this project! It took many more months than I initially planned because I wanted plenty of time to dissect this work but despite the difficulties it took to acquire a cast, I eventually discovered the perfect combination of folks. The project was able to grow largely in part because of the patience of Nathalie Jones, bravery of Caleb Wyatt and vulnerability of Immanuel Williams. I saw these three actors as cores that would help ground the work tangibly and pull outsiders into our world. This was my initial goal though. As rehearsals kicked off and the process got more ramped up I began to appreciate my chorus, composed of Timothy Trumpet Jr., Nirobi Coleman and Leah Fraser-Fallyn. They brought forth the exact challenges, joys and frustrations that the piece demanded of actors who
take on this work and for that I cannot be more grateful. The same significance I gave to casting my actors I took when it came to organizing my production team. A team comprised of Denise Hall, my lighting designer who’s intuitive eye for pictures and shades onstage propelled the show astronomically, Chris Minter, my costume designer whose sensibilities fleshed out the look of the show while keeping my pockets out of harm’s way, and Ryan Cason, my assistant director who supported me and the show profoundly every step of the way, through every trying agonizing step. These people are the community that I speak of because when you attend a PWI as an alienated Black boy you can always rely on your friends to have your back. They proved it with the hardwork and dedication they all brought into the room.

*Ala Ala! The Self-Love Play* would have never become the experience it became without thoughtful placement of not just actors but also of objects. I took on the hurdle of creating the space physically while my actors and team pushed themselves to develop themselves and the space mentally, emotionally and spiritually. I trusted that they could undertake this lofty task and they certainly did. Ifá places great importance on a connection to the spiritual world which to me is physicalized as a shrine, a physical entity representing the environment. This play took place in a very important place to our community at Bard, the Old Gym. Because of that, I wanted to pull in as many items as I could find in the space to flesh out the texture of this shrine so that it could represent us as a cast, as a community and as spiritual beings all at the same time. I saw this as an exaggerated, theatrical if you all, act of self-love and praise. When people see the shrine, I want them to be warmed through and remember what it feels like to be connected to the space around you that you inhabit. The giving of a gift, the feeling of loving yourself the same way that Alala must love himself. What I have now laid out before you are all the moments of dread and worry, the moments of joy and discovery and the moments of love I experienced through the development of this work as both the director and the writer of this
I as an artist learned that I am an innovative dreamer and I learned why that’s important and what it really means to claim such an identity in the world today.

It is scary how easily we fall into states of self hatred nowadays. There is something on the horizon that worries me every single day. This feeling of war, misguided rage and hatred coming to flood all of us in the blink of an eye. To me, this is the reason why Ala Ala! The Self-Love Play is so important at this specific moment in history. I remember that as a little boy I would experience great moments of frustration that would cause me to lash out against people, my friends even, and while making this project, I heard something that my brother was telling me a while ago for the first time in a song he made. “If you love yourself, it doesn't matter what any of these motherfuckers, no matter what any person like rejects you or treats you like crap, no matter what the government does to you, it only haunts the external. Because the self-love you have for the internal, will be enough for you to fight the fuck back.” I hope that everyone who reads Ala Ala! The Self-Love Play understands that no matter what trauma lies in your past, present or even your future, you have to love yourself more than anyone else does. I’m proud to say that through the development of this play I learned what it means to be human, what it means to love yourself honestly.
Ala Ala! The Self-Love Play: The Creation of A Theatre for the Dreamers 20

Ala Ala!

“The Self-Love Play”

Written By

Sondai NaNaBuluku
Characters

ALALA (DREAMER): A young Black boy in a tough spot in life, those early college years we all know too well for the good times as well as the bad. He feels unwell. There is a perpetual cloud hanging over his head and this only frustrates him even more alongside the labor that is getting through the day. Despite his lofty hopes and aspirations, he fails to have faith in his abilities, his artistry, and his vision. This often causes him to collapse in on himself. At his highest, he is a spirit of shining youth that is ripe with a passion for life and at his lowest, he is a cesspool of despair and rage. “If I cross the street, I get hit by a car and if I stay on the sidewalk, the car will swerve off the street.”

PROFESSOR: A temporary Bard professor who runs the L&T class that ALALA is a part of. Fails to see ALALA properly.

GUY: He is your everyday White college fuckboy. He isn’t looking for trouble and he’s not trying to be profound. Takes life as it comes and rolls with the punches because he feels that he can.

FATHER OGÚN: A spirit wrapped up in a force to influence and guide the living and the dead. He now walks alongside the spirits of our ancestors in the past, present and the future. In the show, He guides the chorus and ALALA forward with a smile and an undisputable pep in his step, a hope in his stroll, because there is always joy despite the despair in our lives. “I will hold onto the children of this world until my arms cannot hold on anymore. Then I will find even more strength inside of myself to hold onto them even tighter.”

ÌRÉTÍ (Hope): A super energetic member of the chorus who borderlines on childlike and handles the work of the shrine with a jovial sense of spontaneity. They often cut
loose and like to have fun. They don’t take the job too seriously at the beginning of the show but eventually learn the meaning of caring for the living through Father Ogún’s passions. “The sun will shine one day soon enough even if it has stormed for a decade, the sun will shine one day soon.”

AKIN (The Brave One): They feel like they are the cock of the walk in the shrine, they’re unstoppable, you can’t tell them nothing. Picky and orderly, they easily come across as being one of the most prideful members of the shrine. With that being said, they are not above the childlike disagreements with the other shrine members especially early on in the show. They often enjoy roasting people and stirring the pot to antagonize fellow spirits. “Victory lies ahead of us and it only takes a strong enough person to take the first step necessary to grab hold of it tightly.”

Pamílérin (Make me laugh, Gladden my life): The most direct member of the chorus who tells it like it is regardless of how you feel about it. He doesn’t pull any punches when it comes to the truth. This approach can be divisive at times but he learns the value of gentleness through seeing Father Ogún’s love for Alala and the world of the living. “You can either live in filth and be happy or live in clarity and be angry. There is no such thing as an in between.”

THE HEART: Alala’s only friend at Bard. They don’t connect with Alala properly because he actively pushes them away. They understand that he is different from his surroundings and they do their best to empathize with this struggle. Even though they do not oversaturate the play with their words, they are there with Alala when an act of healing is required to progress. “If I can do one kind act a day, I have begun to take off the blindfold that has plagued our society.”
PROLOGUE: I Hate Myself?

(The stage is completely dark and we only hear the sounds of a pre-recorded conversation between THE HEART and ALALA. The conversation fades in after a brief moment of distorted sound and static. It’s normal and friendly at first. We hear other voices in addition to THE HEART and ALALA. THE HEART’s lines are initially garbled and distorted but become clearer as the scene continues.)

THE HEART
Oh man! I’m glad that today is finally over. It was so long and I swear this one kid hasn’t shown up since the first day of class and nobody has said ANYTHING about it. (No Response) Heh. I bet he’ll pass with flying colors or something too. (No response) Yep . . . it’s been a long day . . . right? (No response) I mean we all hate L&T right? What do you think of the professor, Alala? Alala you listening? (No response) HEY!

ALALA
Stop yelling! I heard what you said alright?

THE HEART
What was it then? What’d I say?

ALALA
I don’t know! I -

THE HEART
What’s going on?

ALALA
Nothing.

THE HEART
That’s not what I asked. Alala what’s going on? Did something happen in one of the classes or something today?
ALALA

No nothing happened because I already said it’s nothing. It’s nothing ok?

THE HEART

Alala what -

ALALA

Can you stop saying my fucking name already? I know my own name! I’m not some fucking dog or something alright? Can you just fucking squash this bullshit argument beacuse like I already FUCKING said there’s nothing going on already ok? Just leave it be because it doesn’t have anything to do with you ok? Cool. Damnit!

THE HEART

I’m just trying to help you out but you’ve gotta let me help at least. *(ALALA is getting up)* So just tell me what’s going on. Where are you going?!

ALALA

Fuck this. I’m leaving! Just leave me alone because I know you don’t know how to listen to simple instructions but can you at least leave me alone!

*(The static and distortion which has plagued the audio throughout the scene begins to overwhelm the voiceover and we eventually only hear “Anti Self-Love (Intro)” play. We see ALALA turned away from us. He is tearing at a notebook and tossing out papers curled up on his bed facing away from us as the music plays. ALALA suddenly falls over onto his bed and tosses the notebook aside. As he lays there, maybe he starts sobbing or maybe he’s just wiping his eyes away from us or maybe he just rests his eyes Eventually the music fades out and with it so do the lights except for a spotlight on ALALA who doesn’t move.)*

**SCENE ONE: I’m Tired of Feeling Like This**

*(Lights up in full in a college dorm room. It’s not flashy by any means and it hasn’t been fully moved into yet as we see boxes and pictures that haven’t been put up or unpacked fully yet. It’s by no means comfortable. As we are looking at this room, we see ALALA sprawled out on his bed looking up. His eyes don’t tell us much except for the fact that he is not in a good place.)*
Eventually, we hear a phone ring. ALALA sighs loudly before he gets up to look at the phone. The moment his eyes see who is calling him, he forces himself to raise his spirits a little. He tries his best to compose himself before answering the phone. It’s his mother calling but we never hear the words she is saying to him only his responses to the conversation they have.)

ALALA
Hey mom. . . Yeah I’m at Bard right now. No I’m not off campus. Is something up? Oh. . . It is what it is. . . It means it is what it is mom. . . No mom I’m just saying it is what it is alright? Nobody has attacked me or assaulted me or whatever so it is what it is. I’m alive. I’m fine. It can’t be that bad right? Yes. No that’s not what I meant. Yeah I’m sorry ma I know you’re worried and it’s serious. I’m just tired is all. I haven’t been sleeping very well ever since I got here. Everything just . . . it just isn’t going well. Ha! She has not been very helpful. . . Well I would but I got class with her so yeah.

Silence. He is listening to her.

ALALA
I gotta go momma. Sorry, there’s an L&T thing and I’m already late for it. . . I know ma. Talk to you later. (Hangs up the phone.) How in the hell did I just get here and everything is driving me up a fucking wall already? (Phone rings again and he looks.) Ugh.

(ALALA goes back to the bed and lays down. He’s still as the ringing of the phone goes on and on until it finally stops. He sighs and then shuts his eyes again. There is a sudden sharp ping on the phone as a notification has been sent. He springs up and looks at the phone again. He takes a moment to make the choice.)

ALALA
Ah what the hell.

ALALA presses his phone and the voice message plays.

PROFESSOR (VO)
Hello? Hello? Uh why am I saying hello it’s a machine. Anyway I hope this is . . . (Horribly mispronounced) Mr. Alala’s number that I have reached. This is your professor, well your L&T instructor anyway. I’ve heard you had some sort of issues earlier on in the day session regarding your . . . um . . . (Clearly talking to someone else) I don’t know how to say this. Differences? Sure. Well, I’m very sorry to hear that really I am but I’m afraid if you don’t come to this next session, our afternoon session, you’ll be at risk of expulsion from the program and from Bard College. (ALALA dies a little inside) Look, my hands are tied here by the admissions office so I can’t pull any strings. I understand that Bard may be a hard place to get used to for someone like you but you’ll have to put your feelings aside to get through this course. We all do it anyway. I hope this is the right number once again. I’ll see you this afternoon or your parents will hear about this too. I hope to see you then Alala.

(There is a silence onstage as the message ends. ALALA turns his phone over and lays on his bed looking up for a moment before exploding. As he goes on and on music seeps in and accompanies the rage ALALA feels inside. It’s anger because there’s no way to convey how he feels honestly other than this. “If I . . .” begins. As the song starts, ALALA pulls out a pen and notepad to write these words down on said notepad.)

ALALA

Question.

If I rolled up a thing of haze, would I be the dopest kid on this campus today?

And If I sniffed up a whole line, would I be known as the coolest Bardian of all time?

If I did every drug in the world and downed all my problems in the bottle liquor swirl, would I get the respect of my peers and all the girls

If I did a couple lifting and a couple more curls

If I took up smoking cigarettes would the white kids look at me the dopest nigger yet or . . .
Turn radical so the Blacks call him a vet but really David Banner, some fucking hypocrites! If . . .

I was little more than five five, would I gain the privilege of being fetishized? I mean thank God the kid’s self confidence on a high or I wouldn’t have the balls to record this shit live!

If I spent more time at the bar, would I get treatment equivalent to that of a star?

Cause nobody really gives a fuck about the arts until they banging in they suburbs some trap song from they car!

If I was a few shades lighter, would I be unanimously known as that kid with skills tighter? These crackas getting by on that ironic shit.

My own people try to undercut me on this studio shit!

You say Black business but I ain’t forgot so on that note, these F bombs blowing your whole block!

Fuck your fakeass co-signing! Fuck your fakeass dick riding! Fuck your fakeass rhymes! Fuck your fakeass lies! Fuck your fakeass support! Fuck your double-sided vocal endorsements! Fuck this rhyming this shit is that important!

And If I changed my whole demeanor, my whole nature, would I still be too White for the Black people and vice-versa?!

If I kept it fake then I wouldn’t be real and all my real ones already know what is the deal so I can’t be that I’ll just stick with these keys and turntables that never cared about none of these things nigga.

(A voiceover clip begins to play over the music of GUY knocking loudly on ALALA’s door.

ALALA doesn’t respond first and keeps writing until GUY speaks.)
GUY (VO)
Hello! Heelllllooooooo! Can you be just a little bit quieter in there man? Everyone on campus can hear you yelling and shit.

ALALA
Nah I can’t keep it down so fuck off.

GUY (VO)
Look man fuck you! I’m trying to be the nice guy here. I’m tryna get me some and you yelling and shit is totally killing the vibe bro! I totally didn’t need to walk over here and try to sort things out with you nicely! I’m not having a really amazing day either I’d like to add!

ALALA
I don’t give a fuck! Damn. I can’t even play my own fucking music without it being a fucking problem now? Nah. Nah! Fuck you ole white dude! Fuck you! Fuck this school! Fuck ya’ momma! Fuck ya momma’s momma! Fuck ya momma’s-

GUY (VO)
That’s mad rude bro! What did I ever do to you? Man chill! Just chill out man. We cool? Hello? (No response) Sounds cool to me.

(Quiet as music finally fades out and with it, ALALA’s explosive rage. ALALA crosses back to the bed and just lays there looking up. It’s silent all of a sudden. He lays there for some time, not full of rage like before but frustration, before finally picking up his phone and pressing something. “The World Is Closing” starts playing and he lays there listening deeply as the lights fade very slowly. Sometime during the song, ALALA drifts off to sleep and the music eventually fades until it’s completely gone and we only hear ALALA snoring through the darkness of the stage. The descent into darkness is slow and continues until there is no sound.)

SCENE TWO: When The Voices in My Head Turn into TV Static, Àṣẹ
(We hear the sound of TV static and distorted music over the darkness that has consumed the space. Lights begin strobe gently. We can see ALALA laying in his bed with his eyes shut but not much else. News reports of Black men enduring America play, he writhes in pain and
starts shaking, maybe even convulsing violently once we hear the occasional gunshots tear through the space. We hear about people who look just like him being taken away, being gunned down, being seen as nothing more than criminals. Suddenly, we hear “Wasalu’s Lament” play. ALALA’s body becomes still as FATHER ÔGÚN enters and tucks ALALA into his bed much like how a dad would tuck in his son. He wipes the sweat from his brow and smiles at him lovingly before placing a hand on him and sitting with ALALA. The other members of the CHORUS, AKIN, ÌRÈTÍ & PAMILÈRÌN enter slowly as well before also placing their hands on ALALA and acknowledging the others. The CHORUS stays here as they hold onto ALALA gently. This moment goes on for a couple of minutes before the stage is eventually cleared of everyone but ALALA and his bed. We have entered into the shrine of our ancestors.)

**SCENE THREE: We Are Gathered Here Today**

(As soon as the music ends and lights are up in full once again, the CHORUS enters while cracking up and exploding with energy. It’s a stark difference from the solemn almost dead energy from before because now we see intense laughter and joy. It’s fun! Eventually, “The Struggle” begins and ÌRÈTÍ, a member of the CHORUS, crosses to the podium, the pulpit for the spirits of this world. The others hype them up as they make their way up to the pulpit. They feed into it because they are a bit of a chauvinist, a showoff and feel that they are the best performer in the world. The CHORUS is entrancing, vibrant, and electric all at the same time. They are having a good time laughing, yelling, and rapping over one another until FATHER ÔGÚN eventually regains control for a verse of his own. Seamlessly and with a sort of gentle dexterity, FATHER ÔGÚN slips into his rap after ÌRÈTÍ finishes up. The CHORUS then moves to hype him up as well during his verse and responds in an even more electrifying way. It’s like we’re at a concert just for us. ALALA is laying in a bed still asleep during this and occasionally stirs in his sleep. Everyone keeps getting wilder and wilder until ALALA wakes up and interrupts them all.)

ÌRÈTÍ

Ayyyy! What you know about this Ogun?

FATHER ÔGÚN

Huh? What are you talking about? I wrote this!
ÍRÉTÍ
So then you should know the words right? Stay on back there and sing along while I speak to my peoples how bout’ that?

THE CHORUS
Ok now hop out, make a flow!
Pop the trunk make it flip for the low!
Matta fact down and out, take an L!
Run it back, try again, and make a stack. C’mon!
We keep on strugglin’ on! (x8)

ÍRÉTÍ
Ok I wrote this fucking verse with 10 dollars in my account
The government fuck around and start garnishing my amount and Landlord
hitting my phone put the money up for the house
In spite of all of the BS I still come with the bounce
Cause I gotta do it for the family by any kinda means
Do not really gotta choice I mean they really count on me
Graduated to a fucking world so cold and cruel tho
Nigga grab a hoodie keep on pushing still we cool ho
Growing sick and tired wish a nigga wasn’t scared to drive Depending on others
just to get a motherfucking ride
Thinking of them days used to slay em on that Tekken 5
When the only thing a nigga had to learn was ride a bike
Wishing that a nigga was a teen
When the only thing that made him cry was Grave of the Fireflies
Back when mom and dad was really just a team
But I guess everything ain’t all that it seems

Really not what it seems.

FATHER ÒGÚN takes the mic from ÌRÈTÍ.
He feeds on the support from the CHORUS.

THE CHORUS
Ok now hop out, make a flow!
Pop the trunk make it flip for the low!
Matta fact down and out, take an L!
Run it back, try again, and make a stack. C’mon!
We keep on strugglin’ on! (x8)

FATHER ÒGÚN
Ok my momma always said I could be all I can be
But from the way shit is looking don’t seem that way to me
When the block is hot the temperature 150 degrees
The government fuck around killing niggas holding degrees
Used to shed a million tears from seeing my people die
I swear to god I done ran out of tears for me to cry
Probably this is summa the realeast shit a nigga ever wrote
This is for you hipsters swaggerjacking like you really broke
Ever had to visit jail to see your cousin down and out
Ever been so broke you couldn’t even help your daddy out
That’s the kinda shit to make a nigga take the blammer out
Running up on err body take the fucking murder route
Wondering if I was better off let off in a sock
Maybe should've hit the block freezing cold selling rock
This is what is real that them rappers never rap about
This is what is real that them rappers never rap about!

(The CHORUS goes crazy. This is the first time they’ve heard this verse from FATHER ÒGÚN.
Even PAMILÉRÌN hypes him up.)

FATHER ÒGÚN
Wooo! See! I told yo’ ass I got all the bars in this shrine alright? Including brand new ones.

PAMILÉRÌN
Alright alright alright. It was alright chill man! You ain’t all that!

The CHORUS picks on them.

FATHER ÒGÚN
Aww. Don’t get all tight cause you’ve been outdone! I’m just fucking with y’all!

They start rough housing.
The CHORUS gets rowdy.
ALALA wakes up but no one notices.

ALALA
HEEEEEYYY!!!

(The music goes off completely. The CHORUS and FATHER ÒGÚN are shocked by ALALA’s sudden outburst. Some in the chorus may simply glare and some curse in response to ALALA’s loud outburst. ALALA tumbles out of his bed and looks around confusedly upon noticing that he is clearly no longer in his dorm room at Bard.)
ALALA

What the fuck is going on?! Why are all y’all in my . . . room . . . I think? (No response) Hello! Y’all can speak right?

(THE CHORUS starts muttering to one another in hushed tones until FATHER ÒGÜN quiets them all and steps down from his podium to speak to ALALA face to face.)

FATHER ÒGÜN

Everybody relax! Relax. He means no harm. He’s just confused. Welcome son! I am the leader of the shrine, Father Ògún! (He extends his arm for a hand shake) You’ll have to forgive them for their confusion they’re not used to your kind here is all. We’ve never had someone like you come here before.

ALALA

My kind? What does that mean?

FATHER ÒGÜN

The living I mean. Sorry for the confusion.

ALALA

I’m sorry w-what?

FATHER ÒGÜN

Hmm. I’m guessing you don’t know much about where you are now?

ALALA

Well it’s definitely not my dorm room.

The CHORUS laughs.

ALALA

What’s so funny? Did one of you drug me or something?
The CHORUS break out into laughter.

ALALA
It’s not funny! I’m being serious!

FATHER ÒGÚN
Easy. You weren’t drugged son but as I mentioned before, it’s weird to have the living visit the shrine so . . . prematurely.

ALALA
So what y’all niggas dead?

(The CHORUS mutters a little ways from ALALA because they don’t really know how to answer this question. Eventually they have an answer. They should tell the truth as honestly as they can.)

FATHER ÒGÚN
Yes. We’re all dead.

ALALA
Oh hell nah! Y’all tripping!

PAMILÉRÌN
What’d you think happens when people die?

İRÉTÍ
I bet he thought it’s like a magic trick or something. POOF! They disappear like fairy dust!

AKIN
I hope not! We did not disappear! Look. I’ll tell ya’ how all this works. We, spirits, just come here to congregate is all. Simple as that.
FATHER ÒGÚN
We just hangin’ out! We’re the ancestors of those who were living, still are living and one day will be living.

*The CHORUS approves.*

ALALA
Ok. That still doesn’t explain what *I’m* doing here though. I ain’t dead. I ain’t dead right?

*They mumble to one another then shrug.*

FATHER ÒGÚN
Oh! I think I understand what’s going on here! He’s dreaming. I made sure he was resting before but I didn’t think he was being sent here to all of us even though he’s alive. Hmm.

ÌRÈTÌ
Wait. Dreaming? You get sent here for something like that? Huh. That’s kinda dope!

ALALA
So I’m just dreaming?

FATHER ÒGÚN
It seems so.

ALALA
Oh. So this is all just some bullshit then?

*The CHORUS members chatter angrily.*  
*FATHER ÒGÚN calms them.*

FATHER ÒGÚN
That’s quite the accusation you’re making. What makes you think all your dreams are so insignificant son?
ALALA
They aren’t real.

FATHER ÒGÜN
Hahahahaha! You’ve been dealing with the wrong types of skeptics!

ALALA
What are you talking about, the wrong type?

FATHER ÒGÜN
Ah! Let me ask you a question first. *(FATHER ÒGÜN takes a seat.)* Take that seat there. Everyone! Find a seat please.

*The CHORUS talks as they file into their spots.*

ALALA
Alright. I’m not gonna be possessed or something right?

FATHER ÒGÜN
No, that’s some White people shit. Sit down. Anyway, what are your dreams? What do you want to do with this life you have on earth?

*The CHORUS chimes in.*

ÍRÉTÌ
Tell it to em’ Father! Tell it to em’!

AKIN
Stop yelling! He ain’t even told him anything yet ya’ damn bozo!

*They argue before being cut off.*
ALALA
Umm. I guess I don’t know. I’m just tryna get through college right now honestly. Shit’s rough so . . . that’s my dream. Get through this shit in one piece.

PAMILÉRİN
You don’t have any dreams? Ha! What are you dumb?!

ÍRÈTÍ
Ya gotta have a dream my boy.

The CHORUS leans in.
They are listening intently to ALALA’s next words.

ALALA
Alright alright alright! I want to do music! I want to make music. My dad, apparently, used to make it before he left us. For some reason, my mom told me that and it’s always been a thought in the back of my mind. I bet I’d be better at it than him though. Yeah. That’s what I’d do!

AKIN
Ayy! What songs has he made?

ALALA
Huh?

PAMILÉRİN
Names nigga. We want to know what some of the titles are!

FATHER ÒGÚN
Alright alright alright! That’s enough fooling around. Let’s focus. Are you sure you want to do something like that?

ALALA
Yeah I’m positive.
FATHER ÒGÚN
Then why don’t you? Make it happen. It’s your goddamn dream right? For crying out loud son you’ve gotta take some initiative!

ALALA
Shit. I don’t know.

FATHER ÒGÚN
Nigga yes you do! You’re lying!

ALALA
I said I don’t! It’s not realistic! It’s all hopes and wants and shit. Nothing good comes out of running around chasing dreams over real concrete possibilities and real consequences!

PAMILÉRÌN
Ha! This is hilarious.

ÍRÈTÍ
Ayy shut up man! He’s figuring it out so stop picking on him.

AKIN
Look! Imma need you to stop shouting so close to me! Your breath smells like ass my boy!

AKIN and PAMILÉRÌN break out into loud laughter.

FATHER ÒGÚN
Y’all cut that out! Cut that shit out! How the fuck are all y’all dead and still acting like a bunch of children? I swear! Look son. I think you need to have more faith in yourself. If that’s your dream honestly, then you should pick it up and hold onto it tight. Real fucking tight ya hear me? Then you go on ahead, make it happen and shout it out as loud as you can!

THE CHORUS
SHOUT IT OUT! SHOUT IT OUT! SHOUT IT OUT!

FATHER ÒGÚN

Yeah what they said.

(FATHER ÒGÚN crosses to the podium again as he is about to begin another sermon. The CHORUS are hyping themselves up once again. ALALA crosses to be near the others in the CHORUS to see what all the commotion is about.)

FATHER ÒGÚN

To be alive in the world, son, you have to be willing to look like a damn fool shouting out your dreams to the world! To the universe! To all of the stars out there! That’s how your life should be son! That’s how every life needs to be! We ain’t got no muthafucking time for laziness and bullshitery! Ain’t that right?

THE CHORUS goes off praising the word.

PAMILÉRÌN

Ayyy! So whatchu tryna say brotha?

“Shooting for the Stars” begins to play.

FATHER ÒGÚN

Yeaaa the nappy headed shit talker

Raised by Kids WB and that channel showing Parkers

Skin darker than the lips of a Camel sparker

Securing the bag on these niggas on my Madam Walker

Stacking bread back when all I had was rye

Poured my own water in so the well don’t run dry

The answer to most prayers be your actions
Your words replace a penny turn your dreams into a bastion
Life lessons from the man that never follow shit
Instead just run through and demolish every mortar brick
Fuck a Morty I was more than Rick
A reckless wild haired nigga catching fear than I swallow it
Shit it back out for the leeches to take a feast
The closest that them niggas will ever get to having a piece
Of the vagabond turned into Padawan
To ban the dark side until the worst of the battle’s gone.

FATHER ÒGÚN encourages ALALA to dance with everyone.

THE CHORUS
Cause we are, we are, we are
Shooting for the stars, the stars, the stars
Cause we are, we are
The we are, we are
The we are, we are, we are (x2)

ÌRÈTÍ
The road less traveled for the cautious
Throw it to the wind cause hesitation gets me nauseous
Down this yellow brick road, braces on my kicks
Stepped up, start Forrest Gump jogging off the shits
Shining bright the radiant sun
Who channels heart and spirit and the hands of Cassius’ son
The silver bullet in these vampires smoked by the gun
Held by the nigga with a golden crown weighing a ton

Some say it's fate to make a mistake

Then come back reverse the curse that sent the birds to the wake

To bring revival to the phoenix that was burned at the stake

To bring a refill to the emptiest of hearts and the lakes

Some Say God, I say mere reflection

I send a compass to my niggas running lost direction

And hope they make it back home where the hatred disappearing

If it's not you got my back bruh I’m in the crowd cheering

The CHORUS engulfs and encourages ALALA.

THE CHORUS

Cause we are, we are, we are!

Shooting for the stars, the stars, the stars!

Cause we are, we are!

The we are, we are!

The we are, we are, we are (x2)!

FATHER ÒGÚN & ALALA

Don't be scared!

THE CHORUS

Don't be scared!

FATHER ÒGÚN & ALALA

Catch us in the air!

THE CHORUS
Catch us in the air!

FATHER ÒGÚN & ALALA
Catch us everywhere!

THE CHORUS
Catch us everywhere!

FATHER ÒGÚN & ALALA
Shooting for the Stars!
Yeah.

THE CHORUS
Shooting for the Stars!

(When the song ends, FATHER ÒGÚN crosses back to his podium and maybe even wipes the sweat from his brow. ALALA speaks out toward everyone while talking to FATHER ÒGÚN)

FATHER ÒGÚN
Woo! Now that’s real music right there! What do you feel, little man? That’s real music right?

ALALA
Maaaaaaann! It was tight! You held your own old man! You make everything sound so simple. Follow your dreams and love yourself because you’re following your dreams? My bad but that shit makes me laugh because it sounds so . . . so . . . fake? It’s just fluff. Like an after-school special. Wishful thinking and shit I think.

FATHER ÒGÚN
Whatever you put out into the universe, is what the universe will hand right back to you. It’s only logical. If you feel like your dreams are impossible, then they are! I feel like you placing a restriction on your dreams makes them lesser than. I don’t know. What y’all think? Does that make sense to y’all?
ALALA

Easy for the dead to say something like that.

ALL laugh.

FATHER ÒGÚN

That’s facts! You’re right. It’s hard to keep fighting for something that may never be. I want to ask you another question.

ALALA

Shoot old man.

FATHER ÒGÚN

Realistically, do you think your dreams might not come true?

ALALA

Yeah. There’s a chance they won’t.

FATHER ÒGÚN

Do you think your dreams may come true?

ALALA

I don’t know.

FATHER ÒGÚN

You say that there’s a possibility for either outcome yet you choose the one that hurts you the most. Why? I’ll ask you again. Do you think dreams can come true?

ALALA

I think that it’s hard but-

FATHER ÒGÚN
Life is hard! Right?

PAMILÉRÌN

Facts B!

FATHER ÒGÚN

Death is hard too right?

AKIN

It is! Look at who I gotta deal with all day!

THE CHORUS reacts.

ÍRÉTÍ

And yet, those things, life and death, keep on keeping on! Despite the shit, the tons of shit, that stops you from keep keeping on, you’re breathing now right? You’re still breathing and your heart is still pumping as strong as it can in your chest because things will keep moving! Right?

THE CHORUS is surprised
   But they still react warmly.

FATHER ÒGÚN

We’re all grateful for that. We’ve gotta be grateful for the chance to figure that out. So lemme tell you this now son. As long as you feel these things inside of you, you make shit happen.

THE CHORUS agrees.

FATHER ÒGÚN

It was a long hard fight to get to where you are now but you made it despite the possibility that you wouldn’t. The possibility of failure cannot be failure itself. Two different beasts! Right?

THE CHORUS approves and chimes in.
FATHER ÒGÚN
I want you to take a seat there and look into this mirror here. Can you do that?

ALALA shrugs before he crosses to
Sit in front of the mirror.

ALALA
What am I-

FATHER ÒGÚN
Just look for a minute. What are you seeing in this moment, son? What are you feeling?

ALALA
Hella uncomfortable. It feels like I’m looking at a mirror for way too long while a bunch of niggas, uhhh I mean spirits, my bad, watch me. So yea . . . this is pretty awkward.

FATHER ÓGÚN
What a deflection! You can’t even look at yourself and yet you’ve already given up on yourself so quickly? That don’t make no goddamn sense! How do you know you can’t succeed when you can’t even look at yourself honestly? The way we all see you. The way that the world should see you when you are following the dreams that you want to follow so passionately.

ALALA
Yeah? Well what do you see that’s so impressive then, old man? Hmm? What do all y’all see, spirits in the back? Huh?

ÌRÈTÍ
A real one!

AKIN
Yeah. Yeah I fuck’s with what my man’s said. I see a real one. A real muthafucking one right muthafucking there.
PAMILÉRÌN
To be honest, to me all I’m looking at is a lil’ bitch right now!

THE CHORUS
Wooooooooaahhh!

PAMILÉRÌN
What? He does! Stop acting like I’m in the wrong for speaking the truth!

AKIN
What they’re tryna say is that we all see someone who can make it happen! Someone who is stopping themselves from *dreaming* because he thinks he can’t do something that he can. Someone who needs to look inside, accept what’s there and stop being a big . . . baby about it. Right?

PAMILÉRÌN
Yeah. That’s the essence of what I was saying. I guess.

ALALA
Ya know what. I think that all of y’all talk about dreams too goddamn much! Dreaming doesn’t do shit for you but fill you with false hopes and aspirations. And I think that-

FATHER ÒGÚN
Stop! What did you just say?

ALALA
What? I said that dreams don’t do anything but fill you up with false hopes and aspirations.

FATHER ÒGÚN
What makes them false? Hmm? The fact that they are truly impossible or the fact that you’re too scared to pursue them? There’s no easy way of getting through life. You’ll have money problems, you’ll doubt yourself, and you’ll regret decisions that you’ll make along the way too even if you were going to be an engineer or a lawyer or whatever feels safe. This life was *never* designed to
have easy ways out of anything. Especially for niggas like you. Cause yo’ Black ass might be shot before you even get the chance to get that far. Then what? You ain’t follow your dreams and yo’ ass dead! That’s no way to leave the world. Trust me. Trust in what we’re preaching to you son. I promise we won’t lead you wrong!

THE CHORUS is a little shocked.

ALALA is frustrated and sits back down away from them.

ALALA

I’m gonna wake up any minute. Then you’ll leave me alone and you’ll all see that dreams don’t mean shit in the end. I’ll wake up and my shitty life is still gonna be shitty right? You know how I know that’s gonna be what happens? Because dreams aren’t real! All of this talk of dreams is pretty and nice old man but I ain’t buying it. My momma can’t follow her dreams so I know I can’t follow my own! My deadbeat ass dad left us high and dry because he couldn’t “deal with what came with having a family like ours” whatever the fuck that bullshit means. Power and control. Those things are the things that mean everything in the world! That’s why momma struggling and daddy left. Dreams don’t make you any money so you don’t get any power or control old man. See y’all gotta get with the program if you’re supposed to be guiding the living and shit. Shiiiii the living got bills and shit to pay. Can’t pay no damn bills with hopes and dreams. Right? The living got to put food on the table. Responsibilities! The living got to somehow keep on living. So fuck all this dreaming shit man cause I ain’t buying none of it.

(THE CHORUS grumbles as they are unsure what to say in this moment but they feel like they should say something. Maybe some even agree with what ALALA said. FATHER ÒGÚN crosses to get a box that he drops right in front of ALALA. THE CHORUS is deathly silent.)

ALALA

What’s this supposed to be?

FATHER ÒGÚN

These are the Black boys that didn’t get here. (Starts pulling objects out of the box) Too many earthly attachments, too much hatred, too much anger, too much sadness makes it so that you can’t find your way here sometimes. There’s so much poison in your system you can’t find the
right path to the shrine, to the ancestors that love you. I look at all of these things and like to think that each and everyone of these boys had their own dreams. Ya wanna know something? They never got the chance to make a choice like that. Never did. When your soul is preoccupied with worry and fear, you lose the ability to change, to move on and pass things. Each and every one of them here was robbed of a chance to even have that much because they were ripped from us, from their families, from their friends, from their dreams. Their own goddamn dreams. Alton Sterling. Philando Castile. Huey P. Newton. Tamir Rice. George Stinney Jr. Emmett Till. Oscar -

ALALA cuts him off and shoves the stuff back into the box.

ALALA
Lot’s of niggas! I get it, I get it alright! Shut the fuck up! This is why I don’t like going to sleep. It’s never just sleep and wake up! It’s always full of nightmares! Not dreams, nightmares! I get that shit enough when I’m walking around the fucking place, or when I turn on the news, or when my fucking mom calls me scared to death every other day! I get it I get it! They’re fucking dead and my momma is worried that that’s gonna be me one day because nothing has fucking changed since then! There’s death on this fucking campus, there’s death in this fucking city, there’s death EVERYWHERE! That’s what you’re getting at right?

FATHER ÓGÚN
So why aren’t you?

ALALA
What?

FATHER ÓGÚN
So why aren’t you dead? Why are you still alive? Right? That’s the next step right? It’s what you’re actually asking yourself now I figure.

(THE CHORUS mumbles lightly as FATHER ÓGÚN takes the box away and walks up to the podium once again.)

FATHER ÓGÚN
That’s one hell of a question son. I think I finally know what’s going on here. I know why you were sent here to all of us now Alala. Like I said before, this is the shrine. The place where spirits come to congregate. We come to sing. We come to laugh. We come to cry. We come here to give aid to you, the living. Our aid doesn’t always sit well with people as you’ve told us more than once now. I know exactly why you were sent here specifically.

\textit{THE CHORUS mumbles.}

\textbf{ALALA}

I can’t take anymore riddles. What is it?

\textbf{FATHER ÒGÚN}

I already told you. Go and look into that mirror. It’s important that you can do this. I don’t wanna hear anything else from you until you can.

\textbf{ALALA}

Some old school magic told you all that huh?

\textbf{FATHER ÒGÚN}

No. An old friend of mine once told me that before you clean someone else’s house, you have to clean your own. Look into your house and pray that you can finally see what’s inside. You have a lot of grief with this world that’s hurt you but you have to look inside and find what’s still there inside. What the world hasn’t gotten to yet. Trust that there is something in there that world hasn’t stolen from you son. The world will rage and war and tear at itself all goddamn day but you? You’re responsibility to yourself is to not let that become who you are now and forever.

\textbf{ALALA}

But I -

\textbf{FATHER ÒGÚN}

Not another word.
(THE CHORUS watches silently as lights focus on ALALA who is making his way toward the mirror. He’s praying while making his way toward the mirror. FATHER ÒGÚN watches him carefully as the world stops moving around everyone. Silence in the shrine as focus falls on ALALA. There’s a sense of seriousness in the air like something monumental will be unveiled to all of us here in this space at this time.)

**SCENE FOUR: The Last Ritual**

ALALA
Alright. I really don’t know what the fuck is going on in here at all or who any of you are, God, I guess. But I need to . . . look into my house or whatever the old man said and get the fuck outta here. I have to. I’m tired of waking up, feeling shitty and repeating this same cycle again and again and again. So . . . yeah. I guess this is my cry for help. Please help me. Please. Here goes nothing.

ALALA opens his eyes as he looks into the mirror.
The CHORUS places their hands on ALALA.
Silence and stillness as moments go by.

FATHER ÒGÚN
What do you see now?

ALALA
I’m beautiful. Wow. For the first time, I can say I’m beautiful.

FATHER ÒGÚN
Forreal?

ALALA
Yea. Forreal.

FATHER ÒGÚN
Yes you are son. If only your mother could see this moment. She’d probably start crying like she always used to whenever I’d pick you up and make you dance with me in the mirror. The way we used to back in the day anyway. I think she knew what was coming though. The pain that was gonna fill up our house. She always had that sense about her. I think that’s why she’d always cry whenever I had you in my arms.

ALALA

Huh?

(Five stray gunshots suddenly tear through the space and we hear the memories of the day FATHER ÒGÚN was murdered. FATHER ÒGÚN slumps as the shots finally end. Everyone is still as we hear the sounds of police sirens, cries and fighting infiltrate the soundscape. The CHORUS continues to hold ALALA who is having difficulty sifting through what’s happening. PAMILÉRÌN crosses to the podium and speaks out toward all of us, loudly. Intense distorted news begins to infiltrate the space by this point. News about single Black families and toxic relationships with Black fathers we can barely make out.)

PAMILÉRÌN

There you have it. All laid out plain as day just for you Alala. Do you see what he, what we, were tryna tell you about?

ALALA

What? I don’t get it!

PAMILÉRÌN

This world robbed you of your father and robbed him of the ability to change. To change himself, to change his community and to change the narrative. Bad. They tore him away from your mother and from you before you could even remember what his face looked like. Ya know I found him. I found him just like this. Bleeding out and just staring. He felt so ashamed he couldn’t even say anything to me when I find him like that. Dying on his feet and just staring. Man this world must be some kind of fucked up right? To do something like that to my family. When I found him like that I grabbed him and pulled him to us. To the Shrine. Right here where he belonged.
(“The Worth of A Picture” begins to play and THE CHORUS suddenly pulls ALALA away from the body of FATHER ÒGÚN. They are covering ALALA’s eyes as they tuck him into bed. He is too tired to resist. Once this is done, FATHER OGUN crosses to ALALA’s bed to sit with him. The CHORUS begins putting the shrine up. Once they’re done, they surround ALALA and say good night to him loudly one at a time. Once they finish, they take what they have offstage as the music fades out. PAMILÉRÌN is the last one to take his possessions but he does not leave. By the end of the song, ALALA is resting peacefully next to FATHER ÒGÚN.)

FATHER ÒGÚN
Hey Pam. This is the first time in eighteen years that I’ve seen my son sleep this quietly.

PAMILÉRÌN
It’s almost time. He’ll wake up and he’ll head right back to the world. Are you ready for that?

FATHER ÒGÚN takes a moment.

FATHER ÒGÚN
Can I have a little more time?

(PAMILÉRÌN nods before exiting. It’s silent as he gets up on the podium for the last time. )

Son. I’m sorry that I couldn’t be there like you needed me to be. It’s going to be hard for you. That world is going to chew you up and spit you out. It’ll break your entire body and leave you on the side of the street to die. It’s done that to us before and it’ll do it to us again and again and again. But remember this my son. You are not allowed to give up! We won’t give up on you so you don’t get the chance to even think about giving up on yourself alright? Please don’t give up. Keep pushing forward. No matter what the world throws into your eyes, you remember those words. Keep pushing forward always and forever. For all of us I mean. This world may not appreciate us like it should, shit I’m starting to think it never will honestly, but it’s fine. It is what it is as they say. Just sleep and dream, dream the biggest, wildest dreams you can possibly dream and when you finally wake up, show the world what you were really dreaming about. Make those dreams even bigger and walk inside of them no matter what. Make sure that’s what
your future holds. That’s what keeps all of our ancestors alive. It keeps all of us alive. When you can finally walk proudly in the shoes they gave to us, when you can finally own the crowns that they made by hand, with their blood and their tears. Everyday, we are living billions upon billions of lives once again. All at once. In a single moment and . . . It’s so fucking beautiful son. I think that’s all I’ve got left for you. Goodnight son. I love you.

**SCENE FIVE: What Does It All Really Mean?**

*(FATHER ÒGÚN exits along with the podium. ALALA is snoring as lights slowly shift back to how they were at the beginning of the show. After a few moments, “Life Is Beautiful Bruh” plays loudly which causes ALALA to stir in his sleep. He slowly gets up, looks at his phone then puts it down as he listens to the music. He bounces around writing in his notepad with a new sense of self as an artist in the world. This transition through the song is very slow and is not meant to be taken for granted as the lyrics for this song are essential for ALALA to hear vividly. Eventually THE HEART knocks at ALALA’s door. They move cautiously because they don’t want to set him off.)*

**THE HEART**

Your roommate gave me the key. I know. You didn’t want me to come over but I wanted to check on you and I’m sorry if that frustrates you or makes you want to lash out at me or makes you want to not be my friend or whatever but I think a real friend should check up on their friend when they’re really having a hard time. *(Beat.*) 5,000 miles. That’s how far away I am from home. I never told you that right? Do you ever feel like you have to perform who you are for people? Show them that you aren’t “trying” to be something, it’s just who you are? You can’t help but feel alone and think that no one really wants to know who you are actually. *(Beat)* Alala. It sucks being here by yourself when you don’t have any friends and you feel like nobody cares about you. You don’t know whether people are gonna be nice for a little bit then be fake when you turn around. They’ll raise an eyebrow or scoff if you walk differently or, god forbid, if you sound differently from them or whatever they’re used to. I just wanted you to know that you aren’t alone.

*(No response, THE HEART looks up at ALALA who’s been listening intently. He crosses to them to embrace them and support them gently after they’ve revealed themselves, their pain,*
their joy to ALALA. A repetition of FATHER OGUN’s generosity in the shrine, a showcase that the work in the shrine will continue here on the earth.)

THE HEART
Phew! That was a lot. We need to get to class!

ALALA
Can you give me a sec first?

THE HEART
Sure. I’ll wait outside.

(THE HEART exits. ALALA goes back to the bed with his phone in hand and dials a number.)

ALALA
Momma? Yeah I’m about to go to this last session but I wanted to say thank you. I really appreciate what you did for me. Have done for me. I . . . Huh? Yes mom I’m going to wash all my dirty clothes . . . No, I’m not high mom. I was just tired before and I didn’t know what I was saying. I’m just tryna apologize and appreciate you momma! Alright mom I gotta go. . . No I mean it ma! Momma I . . . yes, I love you too. Bye.

(ALALA hangs up, smiles, and laughs as he lays back on his bed for a moment before taking a noticeable deep breath, springing up and grabbing his bag. He takes one more deep breath at the door and looks up before walking out.)

ALALA
I love you too old man.

(He exits. Lights focus on his bed as “Blk Man Joy” begins to play which transitions into bows.)

END OF PLAY
Works Cited


