Lonnie Carter Tribute

By Todd London, Artistic Director of New Dramatists

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In the spirit of Lonnie Carter and to praise him: In the spirit of Lonnie Carter—and because one needs a learn-ed, lingua-happy, pun-acious, loose-tongued mind, free-ranging as a chicken—not Murray's but Lonnie's—and to praise this man in the manner in which he would be able to praise himself, if he were that kind of guy, which he is not, having been trained by the Jesuits and believing, or at least seeming to believe, since the phrase appears in no fewer than two of the plays he's written in the past seven years, that "Humility is the true estimation of one's worth"—In the spirit of Lonnie Carter and to praise him, which I come to do, not to bury him, because a Eulogy can be, and in this case most certainly *IS*, intended for someone not yet dead but unquestionably, delightfully, and irresistibly alive. In the spirit of Lonnie Carter and to praise him, I have had to resort to Roget and

his—there's not another word for this—Thesaurus, to call this Tribute what it is, which by any other name would be an appreciation, an encomium, a paean, song of praise, accolade, eulogy for the very much alive, panegyric, gift of gratitude, compliment, acknowledgment, plauditory laudation and lauditory plaudation, affirmation, confirmation, commendation, appreciation —Ball of confusion, that's what the world is today. And the beat goes on: an honorific quite terrific, a salute—you galoot—a celebration, a salutatory salvo from the New Dramatic playwright nation. An esteem bath for you, my friend, a speech of r-e-s-p-e-c-t for Lonnie.

Lonnie got into New Dramatists seven years ago after many tries, or so I hear. He got in and immediately re-invented the phrase "New Dramatist." You see, even in an ideal island of a world like New Dramatists, the miracle of 44th Street, there are people who grumble and gossip. You might be surprised to know. And one or two of the people who grumble and gossip wondered, grumblingly

and gossiply, how on earth someone as established and, shall we say, long haul as Lonnie could qualify as "New."

And that's where he fooled them. Because immediately—and every day for the past 27 hundred and 23 days—Lonnie proved himself to be new. He is an ever- and always-new dramatist and if you need proof, wait till you hear his newest work tonight: Hawking.

Lonnie came to New Dramatists and leapt right in—even though he dressed so much better than the rest of us. He joined our Writers' Executive Committee, dug into our lengthy and difficult (and now defunct) resident selection process, wrote with characteristic unflappable aplomb for our writer's auction, Nocturnal Commissions, threw his hat in the ring for every opportunity and seized every opportunity that arose, including to support other writers here. He held scads of readings, often several of each play, always open to whoever wanted to see what he was

up to, and several music-theatre workshops as well, especially on *Wheatley,* about Phyllis Wheatley, the first African-American woman poet published in America. During his tenure, Lonnie served on our admissions committee, took part in our two-week Composer-Librettist Studio, and in our two-week PlayTime lab last December, where amid the whirl of hearings for Samuel Alito's nomination to the Supreme Court, he re-worked *Brer Clare*, a hallucinatory riff on *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and the Clarence Thomas Supreme Court hearings, which like so much of Lonnie's writing blends pun, perception, and politics, incisive wit and witty incision —Thomas/Uncle Tom; St. Clare/Brer Clare/Clarence.

I digress to quote Brer Clare's testimony before the Senators "Oral Tabernickle from the great state of Polygams and its capital Salt Slick," Chairman "Senator Snarlin' Ghostly Specter, and Ken Teddedy from the great state of Massa-jew-sits:

> Senator, in my position as Chair of the Equal Opportunity Omission Council, I have an office on the 32nd floor of the new William Bennet Building. Mr. Bennet, whose latest quote, "If every black baby was aborted, the crime rate would fall precipitously,' will go down in the anals of jurispatience. As I sit on the floor, Senator, and swivel from starboard to Lee, Virginia, I see below me the paddy wagons as they parade their darkest charges, neck-ironed all, from the slaveship hods to the deepest colons of the duodenums of justice. And as I see them, specks yanked across the concrete in ever-flowing streams of ebony agony, my heart goes right out to the double-paned window which separates me from 32 flights of hell below. And Senator, I spit, I heave up a big hocker and splat it against those double panes because I am angry, Senator, I am hopping mad.

As if all that isn't enough, Lonnie was selected by the Children's Theatre Company of Minneapolis to take part in our Playground

project, resulting in nearly three years of work on *The Lost Boys of Sudan*, which will have its premiere there next spring.

Along the way we've found a most surprising thing about the old guy: there is no more generous, open, devoted collaborative spirit than Lonnie, no one who takes more delight in the talents of others. If you want evidence, you've got it tonight, where nearly everyone reading is either an actor Lonnie brought to ND, met here, or a writer he's grown close to here—the brilliant loyalists of the traveling Lonnie Carter theatre. Similarly, more than any writer I can name, Lonnie made longterm artistic marriages with directors he's met here: Loy Arcenas, Sharon Scruggs, Brian Mertes. He's a serial polygamist, and the ranks of his art-partners grows and stays true.

And his work, too, grows, is ever new, ever expanding. These are the first words of Carter performed at ND and they were performed

at his New Writers' Welcome by Lonnie himself (From *China Calls):*

Keats died at 28, no 7, no 6

Today I'm 58, no 7, no 6

You pays your century

You takes your picks

His was the 19th, mine the 20th

He roared in with sonnets ablaze

I'm stepping out with 50 plays

[skipping]

"When I have fears that I may cease to be

Before my pen has gleaned my teeming brain

Before high-piled books, in charactery

Hold like rich garners the full-ripened grain"

The Keats lines have stuck in my craw, been my law

Bellowed my flaccid iambic members

Held my gnarled dactyls to the embers

Keats dead from consumption at half my age

And still I cough up fresh blood for the stage."

Fresh blood for the stage. It's true. That's what Lonnie coughs up, again and again, because as he says elsewhere in that frankly autobiographical work, "This is my play. It's not like my life. It is my life."

The first thing you notice about Lonnie is the freshness of his language. Actually, the first thing you notice about him, if you're like me, is that he's not black. I've told this story before and this will be the last time. I'm sure other people have stories like it. I was having lunch with the extraordinary Kia Corthron when she told me that Lonnie had been her first playwriting teacher. I'd known Lonnie's work for some years and launched into tirade about neglected black playwrights from the '70s. Kia let me go on before smiling and saying in her sweet way, "Uh, Todd. Lonnie's white." Lonnie's white and he's still one of the great, important,

committed, knowledgeable, passionate, inventive, part of the solution not the problem, pan-African-American playwrights of the last 30 years. Ask any of the hundreds of actors of color he's written dazzling roles for.

The second thing you notice is that language. It's old and new at the same time, drawing from all time, all periods, Swift, Homer, Hip-Hop, Keats, Blake, Dr. Dre, and Aretha Franklin, the songs of the Philippines, phrases from China, France, the Spanish World, pop culture, and the old priests back home. Lonnie named his daughter Calpurnia out of Julius Caesar, and Cal taught Lonnie new words. He wrote them down.

He grinds all of his sources together in that wide, generous logo maw. And out comes a new theatrical Esperanto that's pure Carter, Carterial, Cartil-edged, Carter-esian, idiomatically invented on the fly, tweaked and twisted, punned against and punning, making

itself up as it goes along. New meanings, new perceptions, new lingua politica.

Shakespeare added 2000 words to the English language and uncountable more hybrids and phrases. Lonnie has pilfered Shakespeare's tools: Coinage. Invention. Linguistic profusion. He's smithying at the bard's forge: fashioning ever-new the old tongues. How many new words and phrases hath Mr. Carter wrought.

And just when you think that Lonnie's lingo is all tricked out and tortuous, you get the clean prose of *China Calls:* the international corporate wife who's spirited the children off to Asia leaving her playwright husband doing his Sovereign Boogedy Boogedy at home. She says: "I'm not a Republican I'm not a Republican." He says: "Every action is political/Every passion is political."

Or you get the Neruda-like raw-wood monosyllables of the Filipino migrant workers in the gorgeous, Obie-winning *Romance of Magno Rubio*:

> Why are you weeping, Manong?
>
> Why is your face broken?
>
> How long have you been at this?
>
> This life which makes us all old without cease
>
> What is it when we have no work?
>
> What is it even when we do?
>
> Weep for that that keeps us here
>
> Playing games of cards, so ripped and bent,
>
> My back so stripped and bent
>
> With four or five manongs like me
>
> And always one off to the side
>
> With his solitaire…

Listen to one last, a love scene between the poet Phyllis Wheatley and a cook Samson Osee at the time of the first American

revolution. Listen to the end of it, especially—as Wheatley love-sings Lonnie's manifest o' love to the word:

READ Scene

Here's the secret that's no secret. The fierce Swiftian satirist Carter, the playful hip hop pre-genitor who never met a slippery signifier he didn't want to follow up the Meryl Streep or down to the Deps, Johnny, of hell, whose plays play fast and loose with this lingo and that until each dialect is one big patois cake, this ever and always new New Dramatist, in the heart beneath his natty threads and Jesuit robes, beneath his fierce, magnificent Austro-Hungarian brow, wild with eyebrows from Olympus, this Chicaaago boy with the stern mien and the sweet Peter Pan smile is a Romantic poet, a poet-taster, a heart man. His body of work is a sacre coeur-pus.

Lonnie, on behalf of the writers, staff and board of New Dramatists, I want to thank you for your example—of conviction, fire, invention, poetry, insight, and new-ness. I wish for you a world that lives up to your demands of it, that proves itself capable of growth and righteousness and new coinage. I wish for you a world that speaks from the heart in a common tongue.

Intro play