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Revisiting ‘Funnyhouse’: An Interview With Billie Allen

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Billie Allen

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Revisiting *Funnyhouse*: An Interview with Billie Allen

Billie Allen has been intimately associated with one of the most significant plays in African American literature, Adrienne Kennedy’s *Funnyhouse of a Negro*. In 1964, she created the lead role of Sarah the Negro in the Off-Broadway premiere of *Funnyhouse*, directed by Michael Kahn, for which Kennedy received her first Obie. In 1984, Allen directed a spirited student production of *Funnyhouse* at the Tisch School of the Arts at New York University. Then in 2006 she was invited by the Classical Theatre of Harlem (CTH), co-founded in 1999 by Christopher McElroen and Alfred Preisser, to direct a major revival of *Funnyhouse*, which ran to full houses from January 11 through February 12 (see Fig. 1). The production starred Suzette Azariah Gunn as Sarah, Trish McCall as Queen Victoria, Monica Stitch as the Duchess of Hapsburg, Lincoln Brown as Jesus, and Willie Teacher as Patrice Lumumba. From her unique perspective as a member of the original cast and as a director, Allen’s insights about the origins and continuing importance of *Funnyhouse* form a valuable chapter in the history of African American literature and culture. Not surprisingly, she was nominated for the Lucille Lortel award for outstanding director for her production of the play.

*Funnyhouse* was a profoundly provocative work in 1964 and has become a highly influential one today. Scott Mendelsohn, who reviewed Allen’s 2006 *Funnyhouse* for nytheatre.com (19 Jan. 2006), declared: “Rarely have I felt the complexities of racial identity so compellingly articulated as by *Funnyhouse of a Negro*.” Though *Funnyhouse* is read and taught at numerous universities around the world, it is, unfortunately, seldom performed. One reason is that Kennedy’s highly experimental play radically departs from traditional, sequential plots and realistic characterization, disturbingly transporting audiences into the surrealistic, nightmarish world of the protagonist’s subconscious. Sarah desperately tries to escape her own blackness by projecting various selves from both the white world—Queen Victoria and the Duchess of Hapsburg—and her African one as well—Patrice Lumumba. Kennedy’s play is a challenging work to study, to teach, to perform.

But Allen’s CTH production opened new ways of reading, staging, and interpreting *Funnyhouse*. According to a review in *Off Offline Review*, Allen’s *Funnyhouse* “unearths the stark racial torment characteristic of the ’60s, civil rights era.” In my interview with her, conducted in March and in May 2006, Allen explained why she chose to direct *Funnyhouse* and also how she interpreted Kennedy’s haunting script for the CTH. As a significant part of “Revisiting *Funnyhouse*,” Allen perceptively describes how Kennedy’s play has changed over the decades; she contrasts...
audiences' and critics' responses to it in 1964 with those elicited by the play today. Focusing on individual and collective identities, Allen also revealingly discusses how and why *Funnyhouse* reflects her own racial heritage. Her interpretation of Kennedy’s imagery, characters, and sets gives us a fresh contribution to *Funnyhouse* criticism.

Allen's passionate, long-standing involvement with *Funnyhouse* should be seen as a vital part of her distinguished career as an actress, director, and producer. Born in Richmond, Virginia, in 1925, Allen attended public schools before attending Hampton University. In 1947, she went to New York to begin her professional career in the theatre. As a dancer classically trained at the American School of Ballet, she performed in many concerts at the YWCA and at dozens of events and fundraisers with various dance groups, which lead her to her first Broadway musical and a national tour of *On the Town* with Jerome Robbins. After Allen had performed in several musicals, Elia Kazan saw her dance and auditioned her for the role of Esmeralda in Tennessee Williams's *Camino Real* (1953). He became interested in her work and arranged a scholarship with Lee Strasberg. Allen also studied with Harold Clurman and Lloyd Richards. After meeting her on a crowded elevator at CBS, Ethel Waters cast her as her daughter in *Mamba's Daughters* for a summer stock tour in 1954.

Allen was also a member of the original casts of several major Broadway plays and musicals from the 1940s to the 1960s. Under Otto Preminger's direction, she played in Ira Levin's *Critics Choice* with Henry Fonda and Virginia Gilmore. In 1960, she was the understudy for Diana Sands (Beneatha Younger) in Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*, directed by Lloyd Richards. She stepped into the role for two weeks before it was closed by an Actors Equity strike. Allen also appeared on Broadway in James Baldwin's *Blues for Mr. Charlie*, directed by Burgess Meredith, and in *Black Monday*, written by Reginald Rose, where she and Sands played sisters. In addition to her numerous roles on stage, Allen has a long list of television credits, appearing in many programs during the 1950s-1980s, including *Route 66*, the Hallmark Hall of Fame, and in other programs shot live in front of an audience. Notably, she was a regular on the immensely popular *Phil Silvers* [Sgt. Bilko] *Show*. Allen has also performed in several daytime soap operas including *The Edge of Night* and *As the World Turns*.

As a director, she has shaped numerous major productions. She was a charter member, with Morgan Freeman, Clayton Riley, and Garland Lee Thompson, of the Frank Silvera's Writers Workshop, for which she directed readings of new plays. Allen then went on to direct several Off-Broadway productions such as *The Brothers*, by Kathleen Collins; *The Last American Dixieland Band*, by Philip Hayes Dean at the American Place Theatre; *Time Out of Time*, by Clifford Mason on Theatre Row; and most recently, *Saint Lucy's Eyes*, by Bridgette Wimberly, starring Ruby Dee, at the Women's Project, Cherry Lane, and also at the Alliance Theatre in Atlanta. Allen made theatre history again by directing Anna Deavere Smith's first play, *Aye, Aye, I'm Integrated*, for the Women's Project in 1984. Equally at home working on musicals, she has directed *Miss Ethel Waters* at AMAS Musical Theatre and Langston Hughes's *Little Ham: The Musical* for the George Street Playhouse. Allen's husband, Luther Henderson, an outstanding orchestrator, arranger, and musical director with many Broadway credits, worked with her on these musicals.

**PCK:** Why did you decide to return to *Funnyhouse* after starring as Sarah in 1964?

**BA:** I didn't decide to return to *Funnyhouse*. *Funnyhouse* never left me. By the end of our run in 1964, I was deeply involved with Sarah. As time went by and my life experiences became more varied, I matured and was able to look and
assess them more honestly. I was much more aware of how important this play is in all of our lives. Some think this play is dated and we no longer have to address these problems. The play hasn’t changed. But 42 years later, we have changed. We are now able to look at this play and take this journey with Sarah with truth and understanding. I hoped I could illuminate Adrienne Kennedy’s work with my growth and understanding.

**PCK:** Thanks to Baraka, Shange, Bullins, Suzan-Lori Parks, and Anna Deavere Smith, we have come a long way since the 1960s. A major problem with Kennedy’s plays, however, is that while they are widely read, studied, taught, and appreciated, they are not performed as often as they merit. Why do you think theatres have not staged her work more frequently today?

**BA:** This was new territory. I understood that if the play were to be faithfully done, it was not to be taken literally, because it wasn’t realistic. It’s completely surrealistic. It’s happening in Sarah’s mind, in her nightmares, in her dreams. Sarah lives in her dreams, and that environment had to be projected on stage. This psychic landscape was very difficult to represent in 1964, and it still is today. This is why I believe Adrienne’s plays are not more frequently done.

**PCK:** You have said *Funnyhouse* was a life changing experience for you. How do your experiences and heritage connect you to the play and help you illuminate it?

**BA:** *Funnyhouse* was a life changing experience for me on so many levels. I’m much more accepting of myself and more appreciative of my journey. This world can sometimes be very hostile. I had never seen anything like *Funnyhouse*. I’d never imagined anything like this play. When Michael Kahn sent me the script in 1964, I read it over and over. There was one line I connected with emphatically. Sarah says, “My mother went to school in Atlanta.” Click. There it was. My mother had finished at Spelman College in Atlanta. In fact, my family goes back over four generations of women who have graduated from Spelman. Atlanta held a special place in their lives. My great-grandmother was in the first graduating class. By 1964, we were living in Richmond, but my mother, grandmother, and their mothers, are all Georgia women. This lineage comes to the surface in my background as well as in Sarah’s. For example, when I told my mother that a friend was doing this or that or the other, she would caution me, “We’re from Atlanta and we just don’t do that.”

My mother, probably like Sarah’s, belonged to a club that met every first Thursday in each month. My mother’s called itself The Treble Clef—the Music and Book Lovers Club. These women were very interested in the arts, and they would prepare piano solos and readings or write poems to present at their club meetings. And they’d present artists like Roland Hayes and Marion Anderson, and many other wonderful and gifted African Americans. Yes, they invited Paul Robeson, too. The women in my mother’s club wanted to have noted writers come as well. I remember Langston Hughes came, read, and signed his latest book. Many of these first editions were signed to me. I realized later how many
such books I had when I was moving from one place to another. In any case, these women seriously intended to support the arts.

Because of these experiences, I was able to see and connect with Sarah. I was able to think about what she was going through, and relate to it. I reexamined what I thought about my life, about organized religion, about books, poetry, and many, many things. And I thought it was a bit odd that I’d never discussed a lot of this with anyone. And here it is in Adrienne’s play. Acting in it in 1964 and directing it in 2006, I got a chance to really delve into it and finally put it on a stage.

Funnyhouse was horrifying to so many people in 1964. Even now, friends tell me, “Oh, that play really scared me to death.” There were nightmares, terrors of impending death. But I think Funnyhouse is much more accessible in 2006 than it was in 1964.

PCK: You mentioned your Georgia roots. Kennedy’s family also came from Georgia. What connections do you see in this shared geography?

BA: I knew Sarah’s background first-hand from People Who Led to My Plays, Adrienne’s autobiography. When I read this book, I said, “Oh my God! These are people I know!” I knew the English people who had settled in Montezuma, the town in Georgia where Adrienne’s grandparents lived, and the African American people also who came from them as they [i.e., the English] intermingled with the [former] slaves and with the other people in Montezuma. I remember Montezuma had these wonderful peaches that were sent to us every year. By this time, we had moved to Richmond, and we’d make peach ice cream with real cream and one of those hand-turned ice cream makers with coarse salt. Oh, it was wonderful. And when we’d go to visit our friends in Montezuma, the Thunderbirds, we would have that same ice cream there. And I remembered the Montezuma landscape and the adjoining counties with those red clay roads. So I connected many incidents and many remembrances from my own life to the play. And then I began to really peel the onion, and get to the core, my core, that is, in Funnyhouse.

PCK: Besides family and geography, were there any other things that connected you to Sarah?

BA: Yes, my hair. I remember in 1964 Jet Magazine came one night and saw my hair—this great mass of kinks and curls that sprang loose like a coiled medusa or something—and it frightened them. They had me tie my hair in a silk scarf when they photographed the show. I was disappointed; I wanted to show it off. This was long before people wore their hair naturally, springing loose in what they call Afros. It was always placed. You know, assimilation and all that. I began to love my hair. That was a life changing experience. Instead of regarding it as something that was “undisguisable,” as Sarah says, it’s unique; it’s mine. And I couldn’t wait to unleash it out there on that stage. Some people were embarrassed and said they could never be on stage with that kind of hair. Today we are proud of the exotic choices we can make with our hair.

PCK: How is the Funnyhouse that you directed in 2006 different from the 1964 Funnyhouse in which you starred?

BA: I am not sure I can tell you exactly about the 1964 production, because I was playing Sarah. I was deeply engrossed in my own nightmare, in my fight for sur-
vival. I remember how horrifying Funnyhouse was to so many people in 1964. Even now, in 2006, friends tell me, “Oh, that play really scared me to death. I didn’t know what was going to happen.” There were nightmares, terrors of impending deaths. But I think that Funnyhouse is much more accessible today than in 1964.

In 1964, Funnyhouse was highly experimental. People could not understand this groundbreaking play. Black people were very upset about putting our business and tightly held secrets in the street. There we were, out there, with our knotty locks, pulling them out from the scalp, and tossing them into the air. Also, the play used the N-word, “nigger,” which greatly offended the African American community, and many others, too. They were angry with me for accepting this role. Why would you want to put that on the stage? But by 2006 more people had read the play and experienced it, and the audience was more ready to receive Funnyhouse, because we had become more accepting of ourselves.

From the very beginning, though, audiences were angry about Sarah’s mother sleepwalking and mumbling, “Black man, black man. I never should have let a black man put his hands on me. The wild black beast raped me, and now my head is shining.” They thought Funnyhouse was another play putting African American men down. But it’s not meant literally, and I tried to impart that to audiences. My feelings are that these words were those of an unhappy bride, unhappy in her marriage because she probably thought that, since she was very fair-skinned, she could have married Adam Clayton Powell or Prince Charles or someone else from nobility, and then her life would have been much better.

PCK: What were the impact and the implications of staging Kennedy’s play in Harlem? Would you describe the audience’s reactions and compare them with the audiences you played before in 1964?

BA: The Classical Theatre of Harlem is widely praised for doing daringly controversial plays. Now in its seventh season, the CTH has won seven Obies, a Drama Desk Award, and other prizes. The CTH has a proud record of success. The community is involved. The theatre is right near City College, Columbia University, and Barnard, and not too far from NYU, and many other universities. Students flocked from all over New England to see Funnyhouse staged, and, of course, we had many audience members from across the country and from Europe, too, who had not been able to see this Kennedy play performed before. Funnyhouse remained highly controversial. Even in 2006, after 42 years, not everybody was thrilled by or understood it. But I think that everyone was viscerally affected. As in 1964, many people in 2006 were still lost and confounded. Many people in the audience said to me, “I may not understand it, but I will never forget it.”

PCK: Did you change the script when you directed Funnyhouse in 2006?

BA: Actually, I did not change one word. No words may be added or interchanged, because it will destroy the meaning; it will destroy the rhythm. And if you have to, go back into the text and see why you can’t make it happen and the meaning, the logic will follow. I did say when I was casting that the language was very important and that I was interested in casting actors who dealt with language well. As the piece began to develop, with repetition, the rhythm of Adrienne’s script was established and understood. It is wonderful when actors get into it and are really able to carry it through.
PCK: How did you approach *Funnyhouse* in 2006?

BA: I went at it by breaking down Sarah’s nightmare. I explored the psyche of this young black woman having an identity crisis and experiencing extreme self-hatred and cultural alienation. For me the key to Sarah’s nightmares was understanding her other selves. Sarah has an identity crisis right there on stage. I urged the actors to ask of their character, “Where do I belong?” Sarah says, “I know no places,” that is, “I cannot believe in places.” To believe in places is to know hope. And to know the emotion of hope is to know beauty. It links us across a horizon and connects us to the world. But Sarah’s words are, “I find there are no places, only my funnyhouse.”

PCK: How did you interpret Sarah’s various selves through her eyes, from her own perspective?

BA: I saw Queen Victoria, a powerful woman who had a whole era named for her, as Sarah’s idol. She had a white plaster statue of Victoria in her room, and she conversed with Victoria. They were friends. Suzette Gunn’s Queen Victoria was very regally dressed in a marvelous costume, all in white, with crinoline. The gown was a shiny cheap satin with a fanciful headpiece, with kinky hair sticking out from under her headpiece. Kimberly Glennon, our costume designer, brilliantly showed how Sarah would imagine a queen who was her acquaintance. I envisioned how Sarah and Victoria would talk, and, of course, I directed Victoria and the Duchess to use fake English accents to denote royalty, for that is how Sarah would have perceived them. When Sarah examined her relationship to Queen Victoria, I instructed Suzette’s Victoria to turn her head away from Sarah, a rejection. Even though Sarah realizes that Victoria doesn’t really love her, it doesn’t stop her from wanting her company. But Sarah certainly pondered Victoria’s rejection and was pained by it. And when Sarah’s father used the same words, the reverberation of the rejection made for a compelling moment on stage. I tried to capture Adrienne’s wonderful device of repeating and using the same words, changing them slightly from one character to the other, so they have completely different meanings. This repetition puts the audience on the edge. Hearing essentially these same words, the audience ponders what is happening, what is going on.

Similarly, the Duchess of Hapsburg, who research shows was Castilian, inferred that maybe she herself was not altogether white, reinforcing Sarah’s own doubts and dreams. She kept saying, “Yes, but, I am black and she is white, but I am in between.” When I cast the Duchess, I recalled the Bette Davis and Paul Muni film *Juarez* (1939). I visualized Raymond and the Duchess in terms of this film, which, of course, had influenced Adrienne, as she confessed in *People*. When the Mexicans tried to dethrone Carlotta’s husband, Maximillian, she went mad and ended up in an institution. Bette Davis played Carlotta in *Juarez*, and when I thought about this character, I saw the Duchess completely self-absorbed, a classic narcissist. In my CTH production, the Duchess appreciated her lovely long arms and her skin and kept preening in front of the mirror. I interpreted all of her musings in this context—“My father is the darkest, my mother is the lightest, and I am in between.” Priding herself on her beauty, she says to Raymond, “Hide me here so the nigger will not find me.” No matter what’s going on, she’d get right back to her mantra. “My father is the darkest, my mother is the lightest, and I am in between.” When her Duchess self tries to seduce Raymond, Sarah writhes in bed with desire. I wanted to convey that Sarah, as Carlotta, reasons that if I were to marry Raymond, or if we were to amalgamate in some way, then I’d be absorbed into the white race, and I wouldn’t have to consider this idea of being black any more.
PCK: How did you interpret Patrice Lumumba, one of Sarah’s male selves? This assassinated African leader is the most horrifying of Kennedy’s characters in *Funnyhouse* with his “head . . . split in two with blood and tissue in his eyes.”

BA: I saw a strong connection between Lumumba and Sarah’s father. Sarah’s father appears using the same words spoken by the other characters to appeal to Sarah for forgiveness and to explain what happened to her parents’ marriage. Suddenly, there are drumbeats, and her father morphs into Lumumba, Sarah’s other self. Her father chides her for denying her roots. Sarah had constant nightmares about her father’s constant knocking, trying to enter, reminding her not to forget. In this scene with Lumumba, he gets physical with her when he thinks she is not listening to what he has to say and terrifies her to make his point.

PCK: Yes, Kennedy’s dialogue is haunting, lyrical, recycling speeches and lines from one character to the other. In your CTH production, how did you conceive and capture such poetic techniques for the audience?

BA: Adrienne uses a lot of repetition in *Funnyhouse*. Phrases are repeated over and over again. Each of Sarah’s selves is given many of the same lines in each scene. In our production, I found that Sarah’s inner logic is the key to the audience’s understanding this repetition. Sarah is in crisis. Her selves are in a heightened state; the stakes for them are high—life or death. I never wanted the audience to forget that it was her nightmare. The repetition of Adrienne’s haunting lines helps create that nightmare feeling. Sometimes Sarah escapes into her funnyhouse romantic fantasies to get relief, as in the scene with Raymond and the Duchess. She flirts with Raymond, attempting to escape through him. But he challenges and torments her. They are using the same words, the same themes that other characters in the play do, but this time the words between Sarah and her white boyfriend have a different meaning.

The Landlady also repeats the words and themes, which is definitely *schadenfreude*. Hers is malicious pleasure. She is the white world laughing at Sarah’s pretences of royalty, inventing herself, feeling so high and mighty. The Landlady feels elevated in her community by having this exotic creature living in her house, someone that she can put down, someone to whom she can feel superior. I positioned the Landlady stage right in her funnyhouse box, as if on a perch, attracting the audience’s attention with stories of this beautiful creature. Opposite the Landlady on stage left, I placed Raymond as the Funnyhouse Man. He and the Landlady exchange tidbits of gossip about Sarah. They laugh at her. When Raymond leaves his funnyhouse perch to join the Duchess in Sarah’s bedroom for their scene, he removes his funnyhouse hat, spruces himself up, perhaps donning a Valentino mustache as a romantic lead opposite the Duchess. Again, in all of this, I emphasized the repetitive text to show the audience that Sarah’s selves are a part of her. For example, I had Sarah mouth some of the words as her selves speak so that the audiences knew that they are speaking through each other.

PCK: What was the cumulative effect of the repetitions in these highly lyrical speeches?

BA: Adrienne’s repetitions spin into a powerful buildup. They begin as a chant and then accumulate. What intrigued me about this characteristic of Adrienne’s work is that when we think of more linear plays, it would have taken an entire act to do what she simply says in a few lines: “His mother wanted him to be Christ. At dawn he watched her rise, kill a hen for him to eat at breakfast, then go to work down at the big house ‘til dusk, ‘til she died.” Well, there it is—a whole act in a conventional play, but Adrienne takes only four lines to tell you everything you need to know. And you feel it. You can see this worked-to-death
woman who got up before day, actually killed the hen, prepared it, and dressed it for him to eat for breakfast, then went down from the servants' quarters, or the slave quarters, to the big house as a servant 'til dusk, 'til she died. There's her whole life right before you. And she repeats the refrain often, "I wanted to be Jesus, to walk in Genesis and save the race. I wanted to return to Africa and find Revelation in the midst of golden savannas, nim and white frankopenny trees, white stallions roaming under a blue sky, walk with the white dove, heal the race, heal the misery, take us off the cross." I wanted audiences to see the exciting landscape with white stallions and blue skies across the savannas. Even in 1964, audiences were awed by the imagery—white stallions roaming under a blue sky, walking with the white dove, suggesting peace, beauty, life, looking for the light.

**PCK:** In terms of Kennedy’s poetry, how would you characterize the acting style you strove for in your CTH *Funnyhouse*?

**BA:** I would describe it as Brechtian, larger than life. I presented Sarah's nightmares on a grand scale, exaggerated movement, exaggerated speech. In directing the actors, I didn't advise them to use any one acting style, but, of course, I thought of it all as exaggerated, as Sarah's nightmares would be. Adrienne's writing is very lyrical, poetic, precise, and powerful.

**PCK:** You say Sarah hands things to her selves, and they do the same for her. How else did the selves notice and interact with one another in your 2006 production?

**BA:** Sarah interacts with all the characters, but, most importantly, with her various selves. She just does not sit on stage delivering long monologues. In the CTH production, there was always a connection between Sarah and the other selves, so that we knew that these are all parts of her. The connection that Sarah has with each of her selves was clearly established after we got to a certain point. They would recognize each other, have verbal exchanges, hand each other objects, such as a mirror, further stressing the intimate bonds between them. Sarah was never just asleep in her bed. When she brings Raymond and the Duchess onto the scene, we hear the *Gone with the Wind* theme music from the film and we see Sarah prepare to receive Raymond who comes leaping gallantly onto the stage. As the scene progresses, we then see Raymond and the Duchess in romantic foreplay, a prelude to a possible assignation. We witness Sarah's enjoyment, laughing with the Duchess and, in some instances, mouthing the words as another character speaks them. We also watch her at her desk writing furiously in her journal, again mouthing the other characters' words. To underscore these visual connections between characters, I had Sarah's selves respond to each other, especially Queen Victoria and the Duchess. I presented them as pals, confidants but also as rivals. My goal was to have an audience readily tell that they were in Sarah's mind. Victoria was always on stage, too, sitting on her throne, listening, reacting with the father and with Lumumba as well.

But I wanted to give particular emphasis to Sarah's relationship with Jesus. He had disappointed her. As a small child, she was probably taught to sing "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so," and she really believed it. But Sarah's life is falling apart. Queen Victoria has rejected her, and Jesus has let her down. When she begins to doubt her religion, she doubts Jesus. In this nightmare world, Sarah reasons that it must be Jesus's fault because He is omnipotent and can make everything all right. Jesus and the Duchess vie for Sarah's attention. Her selves are at war with each other, trying to win her favor. During the jungle scene, all the selves are in her bedroom, circling her, taunting her, forcing her to give up. They want to see her dead. Circling and chanting their discon-
tent, they drive Sarah to the noose, which she gladly accepts and embraces. The central question I raised in the production was, did Sarah really kill herself, or did she kill herself in her nightmare?

PCK: That is a brilliant reading, a true play in and of the mind. How did Raymond and the Landlady fit in your interpretation of Funnyhouse? How did you conceptualize and present them?

BA: The Landlady and Raymond are the two white characters in the play. To emphasize their whiteness, we had a spotlight put on them as they flanked the stage, one on each side of the proscenium, as I indicated. The Landlady was on stage right and the Funnyhouse Man, Raymond, was on stage left, representing the whole format of the actual funnyhouse. They were visible throughout the production, laughing at, mocking, and sometimes commenting on Sarah and her selves. They laugh wildly and chat with each other about this miserable creature. Sarah’s Landlady owns a brownstone “in the West Nineties.” Even though it appears to us that Sarah is a graduate student and works in a library, and that she functions well enough to do that, the Landlady always laughs at her. But this white woman is, as I have said, very pleased to have Sarah in her dull life—this exotic creature who thinks she’s a princess with all of these airs and imaginations going on. I think the Landlady is a scathing character, so destructive and so callous. She’s happy to see Sarah’s misery. The Landlady and Raymond just degrade her, behind her back. I wanted to raise the question—are they laughing behind our backs, do whites laugh at blacks, or are we imagining it? I wanted the audience to feel this uncertainty. But Sarah feels that it’s actually happening—brilliant of Adrienne. I directed Sarah to think the whole white race is laughing at her, deriding her, and, of course, the Landlady does just that. And since Sarah’s response amuses her, she laughs that wild Funnyhouse laugh. I think it is important to recall that Adrienne titles her play Funnyhouse of a Negro—not the Negro. She’s very specific.

Raymond, too, was a key character for a lot of reasons in the CTH production. At one point, Sarah says, “I should laugh and say, ’I love Raymond!’ but he’s a poet, and he’s Jewish and very interested in Negroes.” I directed Sarah to believe that he is a possible option in her life. In interpreting Raymond, I recalled this poet I knew who went to City College and wore a cape, white sneakers, and a fedora, and was always reciting poetry, imagining that he was a pretty good writer. My take is that Raymond—the poet—has found this morsel, Sarah, who claims, “He’s very interested in Negroes.” How often have we found people in our own lives who are very interested in Negroes? So, I imagined Raymond as a student, at CCNY perhaps, and he’s taken his own place, which is near Sarah’s, or maybe even in the same building or next-door. I envisioned for my production that they meet, they walk to school sometimes, and he would invite her to come to Friday night dinner at his parents’ wonderfully appointed apartment on the upper West Side, opulent, heavily damasked. He invited Sarah to annoy his mother. I saw his mother as a liberal who just doesn’t know how to say, “No, I don’t want her in my house.” So she tolerates the situation. But she’s not happy.

PCK: How did the set fit into your interpretation of Funnyhouse?

BA: The set was very important. We must feel that nightmare, that dream. CTH set designer Troy Hourie accomplished that. In our production, the bed seemed rather like a mahogany casket. It took us to that place with deep burgundy, satin-like comforter and sheets. Yet it was large, and people could walk on it. Sarah could sit on the headboard that was large enough, but it suggested an impending doom; it symbolized death. In fact, the noose with which Sarah
herself descends from the ceiling above her as she stands on the bed. Down stage right, we placed a crude vanity table or desk, stacks of books everywhere, as characters walk through the walls or just appear on stage. In the jungle scene at the end of the play, where all of her selves are surrounding and chiding her, she finally just asks for the rope in relief. As they’re pulling their hair out, the jungle drums beat louder and hair flies all over the stage floor. When Sarah finally does take the rope, they laugh wildly. A chilling moment, shocking every time it happens.

**PCK:** *Funnyhouse* might be described as an opera of terror. What other kinds of sounds and music did you incorporate to orchestrate the marvelous notations found in Kennedy’s stage directions?

**BA:** Adrienne’s stage directions are very precise and offer significant sound cues; for example, birds are flying, owls are hooting, and so forth. But she doesn’t suggest specific music. Michael Messer, the sound designer, did an excellent job in putting sounds with script. Each scene, each beat was scored, very much like a film, to lead the audience into Sarah’s world. To capture Sarah’s nightmare, we searched for sound effects that would suggest a possessed house. There are people living in the walls who suddenly appear and suddenly disappear. There is a constant knocking. Sarah’s black ancestors are claiming her. And in the course of the production, the knocking gets louder and louder. The banging stops, though, when her father enters begging for forgiveness.

**PCK:** You mentioned Queen Victoria’s regal costume as symbolic of how she might appear in Sarah’s nightmare. What symbolism was attached to other characters’ costumes?

**BA:** Kimberly Glennon created tawdry gowns and fanciful headpieces with kinky hair springing from parts of the scalp to be worn by the Duchess and Queen Victoria, perfect choices to visualize these selves through Sarah’s eyes. Their makeup was ghoulish, too. In contrast, Sarah wore the dress of a student, circa 1964, a black crewneck sweater with long sleeves, an A-line skirt just below the knee, and black tights. (In 1964, I wore dingy white sneakers.) Sarah’s black outfit ties in with her wish to be anonymous. We costumed her mother in an institutional muslin nightgown with long sleeves tied loosely around the waist. She went barefoot with a long dark wig. Lumumba was dressed in a bloody tattered safari suit, and on his face was a tribal mask with a bloodied open gash on his forehead, as described in the script. Raymond, the Funnyhouse Man, wore a colorful juggler’s outfit with a black derby, something you would see at a circus. The Funnyhouse Lady in her red wig and bright dress with polka dots and overdone makeup was suitably outrageous. Lastly, Jesus was draped in muslin with a crown of thorns, and the stigmata as seen on the cross.

**PCK:** The funnyhouse motif is rich, and ripe, with possibilities for absurd, ghoulish humor. Were there any places in the script where you saw opportunities to explore such humor?

**BA:** In the mist of the tragedy, there is always humor. Finding this humor is a delicious discovery. In directing the CTH *Funnyhouse*, I saw humor in Sarah’s delivering the line “I laugh and say that I love Raymond but I do not. He’s a poet and he is Jewish, and he is very interested in Negroes.” The scene with Raymond and the Duchess also could be played for some humor. She is carrying on with him so. Victoria’s haughty disdain for the Duchess can be played for laughs as well. When Sarah delivers lines about her father building missions in Africa, she throws herself around and tries to impress him. One has to imagine this scene as farce. And certainly Adrienne’s Jesus opens himself up with absurd
humor. I had him preach and rage, to leave the audience with the question of whether he is putting us on or not. Directors, of course, have many choices to assert their take on the play. I am not sure I would direct *Funnyhouse* this way again, with this absurd humor floating in.

PCK: What is the hardest part of directing *Funnyhouse*?

BA: Let’s start with casting. I looked for strong, well prepared actors who had the technique to bring these characters to life, actors who will experiment and be flexible, have a sense of humor and the facility to deal with language, who can articulate and understand the meaning. In casting Sarah, I looked for an actor who is honest about the moment-to-moment reality, what is going on with her at that moment, what she really thinks. Let’s bring that to the stage. I wanted an actress of some life experience who will dig deeply into her life, take chances, and not worry about going out on the limb. I told Suzette Gunn that I will catch you and I will show you how to catch yourself. We did exercises and discussed how to take it to the max and yet get back to a safe place, because after all, you have to live your life, you have to get home, you have to put on your shoes and tie your shoelaces. This is no easy task dealing with *Funnyhouse*.

PCK: You have directed work by Anna Deavere Smith and other African American playwrights. Where do you see the strongest effects of Kennedy’s influence (even her legacy) in *Funnyhouse* on contemporary playwrights?

BA: Adrienne has informed everyone in the theatre—playwrights, actors, designers—that we no longer have to think inside of a box. We can unleash our subconscious thoughts and dreams and audiences can certainly receive them. In particular, I think Adrienne has influenced the many playwrights who have paid attention to one of the key lessons in *Funnyhouse*; that is, there are many ways of thinking about a play. Her experimental theatre, with its surrealistic effects and characters who deliver these haunting interior monologues, created a major legacy for playwrights. I see a great deal of Adrienne’s influence in, say, Suzan-Lori Parks’s *Last Black Man in America*, in its experimentation and inventiveness. Ntozake Shange also has recognized Adrienne’s influence. I think generations of playwrights to come will also be affected by this groundbreaking play. A play needn’t be linear or sequential. And when it’s pouring from you, that’s when it’s going to happen. Of course, to have a play work like *Funnyhouse*, you need someone like Michael Kahn who directed it in 1964 and spent two years sorting through the material. My hope is that the CTH production illuminates this play and in some measure gives future directors license to use their imagination, that it helps them to soar, to fly, to experience, to burn, to take the journey.

PCK: Would it ever be possible to transform *Funnyhouse* into a film? Kennedy was approached about writing a screenplay one time, but I do not think this ever materialized. Given her keen interest in the movies, did you as a director see any places in the script that were especially filmic?

BA: I think that Adrienne did write a film script of *Funnyhouse*. And, yes, I could see a film director opening up the play and going deeper on so many levels. *Funnyhouse* is such a visual piece. I hope Adrienne will see this project through.