

## Reworking identity on stage: a review of *Fabulazione, o la rieducazione di Undine*

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### ABSTRACT

The staging of *Fabulazione, o la rieducazione di Undine* at Teatro Torlonia on 18 September 2024 was the result of the incredible work of the actors, the directors Paola Rota and Ester Elisha and the translator Valentina Rapetti. This event, which finally brought Lynn Nottage's work to Italy, was part of the project "African American Drama on the Italian Stage" designed by Valentina Rapetti and supported by Università della Tuscia, Teatri di Roma and the United States Embassy. The project aimed at spreading the work of contemporary African American playwrights in Italy while simultaneously addressing the issue of black representation in theatrical productions. By analyzing the play and the different stages of the project, this review has the purpose of highlighting the importance of interdisciplinary projects in creating new spaces and opportunities to reflect artistically and collectively upon the issues of identity and representation.

### Keywords

African American drama, Theatre, representation, Blackness, Lynn Nottage

In recent times, the Italian cultural panorama has finally witnessed the emergence of theatre productions, workshops and translations of plays written by playwrights of color, or centered on themes of identity, migration and cultural representation. These include not only larger productions, such as the staging of August Wilson's *Jitney* at Teatro Astra in Vicenza in 2023, but also the work of emerging playwrights, such as *Ban Ban Kaliban* by Nalini Vidoolah Mootosamy, which is the result of the 2024 edition of the workshop "Piccola Bottega" in Rome.

Within this framework, the project "African American Drama on the Italian Stage" can be considered as an important cultural event in which academic and theatrical research are intertwined. The project culminated on 18 September 2024 with the staging of *Fabulazione, o la rieducazione di Undine* at Teatro Torlonia in Rome. However, the show was just the final phase of a comprehensive and stimulating process that involved eight months of collaboration between the company and the translator of Lynn Nottage's plays, Valentina Rapetti.

At the beginning of 2024 twenty young actors, most of them black, were selected to work on contemporary African American playwrights Suzan-Lori Parks, Lynn Nottage and Lorraine

Hansberry. On 7 June 2024 *Fabulazione* premiered at Teatro Torlonia with the short play *PUFI*. Since then, the plays have been staged two more times, and Lynn Nottage was present in one of the encores. The actors and actresses involved are Alessandra Arcangeli, Yonas Aregay, Nicolò Ayroldi, Alioune Badiane, Greta Bendinelli, Simona Boo, Eny Cassia Corvo, Madeleine Faye, Didi Garbaccio Bogin, Gaja Aurora Ebere Ikeagwuana, Nadia Kibout, Marianne Leoni, Ilaria Marchianò, Martina Sammarco, Chiara Sarcona, Val Wandja and Nour Zarafi, under the direction of Paola Rota and Ester Elisha.

The project “African American Drama on the Italian Stage” was designed by researcher and translator Valentina Rapetti in collaboration with Università della Tuscia and Teatri di Roma, with the support of the United States Embassy. The project originates from Rapetti’s academic research “Theatrical Citizenships: African American Drama as a Form of Art, Activism, and Agent of Social Change,” developed with Università della Tuscia in the years 2022-2024. Through this research, Rapetti worked on the translation of some of the plays written by Lynn Nottage, a two-time Pulitzer Prize winner. The idea of “theatrical citizenships” highlights how the lack of institutional and political representation of black people in Italy is deeply entangled with the lack of a complex, multifaceted representation and visibility in the arts. At the beginning of 2022, Rapetti started quantitative research that was aimed at analyzing data on the programming of plays and theatre shows written by black playwrights, as well as the enrolment of black students in National Drama Schools. The results of the quantitative analysis laid the foundation for the project and vividly demonstrated the importance and the urgency of bringing themes and stories of the African diaspora to the audience.

In the early stages of the process, the actors participated in a workshop of two weeks in which they worked on the plays and contextualized them within the history of African American drama in the United States. The workshop was articulated in four lectures held by Kwanza Musi Dos Santos (Associazione QuestaèRoma), Anna Scacchi (Università degli Studi di Padova), Jessica L. Harris (St. John's University and Rome Prize at American Academy) and Giordano Zevi (Deputy Head of Division Economic Outlook at Banca d'Italia). These lectures supported the stage readings of the plays *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959) written by Lorraine Hansberry and translated by Ettore Capriolo, *Poof!* (1993), *Intimate Apparel* (2003), *Fabulation, or the Re-Education of Undine* (2004), *Sweat* (2015) and *Clyde's* (2021) by Lynn Nottage and translated by Valentina Rapetti, as well as *White Noise* (2019) by Suzan-Lori Parks, translated by Valentina Rapetti and Monica Capuani.

The reading of the plays alongside the lectures opened up an important space for discussion for the actors, who are the core of this project. In a conversation with Yonas Aregay and Val Wandja the workshop emerged as the most innovative and intense part of the whole project. Actor Yonas Aregay underlined how those two weeks were a unique opportunity to

explore and concentrate on the meaning of the plays while bonding with the other artists, as they were all part of the same process. Similarly, writer and actress Val Wandja pointed out that the workshop was a distinctive trait of the project, since it created an environment in which the cast could reflect on the issues of racism, identity and blackness both as elements of the plays and as part of a political reflection on the present. According to Wandja, *Fabulazione*, in its comic and tragic aspects, was a text that eventually allowed the cast to further explore the thoughts and complex emotions that came up during the workshop.

*Fabulazione, o la rieducazione di Undine* is a play about the social fall of Undine Barnes Calls, a thirty-seven-year-old African American woman who manages to emancipate herself from her working-class origins and become a successful publicist. However, her fortune and financial wealth are shattered when she finds out that her Argentinian husband ran away with all her money, leaving her pregnant with a child that he knows nothing about. Undine is thus forced to return to her family's home in Brooklyn and reconcile with her past.

In this play, Lynn Nottage explores themes of class and social mobility and their intersection with race and gender with a poignant and ironic tone. As in classical theatre, Nottage plays with the idea of one's background as a form of fate that can drag you down and back to where you are from, despite all your efforts. In the first act Undine – who is wonderfully played by the actress Eny Cassia Corvo – receives the news that she was a victim of fraud. However, the police officers claim that they have not found any record filed under the name of Undine Barnes Calles. It is as if she appeared out of nowhere, *having no background story*. The play – which is characterized by a quick and dynamic pace, without any blackout until the end – now pauses. Undine sits on the stairs of the stage and speaks directly to the audience. In her monologue, she explains that it was through her education that she managed to leave her Brooklyn life behind and build the right connections for her career. As soon as she finishes her monologue, the course of events starts right from where it was interrupted, and Undine gets caught by a terrible pain that she had named 'Edna'.

In this powerful scene Nottage shows that there is no continuity in Undine's identity, and the multiplicity of names is symbolic in this sense. Undine, born Sharona Watkins, decides to embrace individualistic, neoliberal values in order to become part of the African American elite. However, this implies giving up her past life and pretending that her parents died in a fire. Thus, taking a new name is not an act of self-determination, but rather it is part of a process of removal. The passage from Sharona's past life to Undine's present is so deeply marked that nothing can be retrieved from the past. Not her parents, not even her name. Nottage thus highlights the way in which the category of class works as a marker that differentiates the rich from the poor black masses.

In *Where We Stand: Class Matters* (2000) bell hooks calls attention to the necessity of addressing the issue of class in the black community because a cohesive movement of anti-

racist solidarity cannot exist if class differences continue not only to be ignored, but also to be exploited by the elites. In the book, the writer recalls how at the end of her PhD she was not able to tell who she was anymore, and whether she had given up on her values and betrayed the working class. She thus became aware of the contradictions that were entailed in her condition as a well-educated African American woman. While watching *Fabulazione* at Teatro Torlonia, I kept asking myself whether Undine should have felt guilty about wanting to leave her Brooklyn life behind, and whether that was really her desire. Most importantly, as bell hooks also appears to wonder, I asked myself to what extent it is possible to become something new without breaking away from one's personal and collective history.

Through the character and the journey of Undine, Nottage openly addresses the political issue of class and explores a narrative of self-made success that was assimilated by the black upper class. In contrast, the attempt to create a healing and cohesive narrative is embodied by the character of Undine's brother, whose evocative name is Flow. Played by Val Wandja, Flow is a security guard who spent the last fourteen years writing an epic poem centered on the figure of Brer Rabbit, a classic trickster from American folklore. Through his poem, Flow tries to reconnect his ancestors' history with present-day African American identity. However, the poem appears to be never-ending, as he is constantly waiting for the right words to come, claiming that "a fabulation takes time, it doesn't just happen" (Nottage 2006, 132).

Through the interplay of different types of narratives, Nottage conveys the idea of identity as a fabulation itself. By writing a play that explores and disassembles the narratives of African American identity, the author acknowledges the power of words and stage representation in shaping the discourses around it. Overall, *Fabulazione* simply and straightforwardly exhibits the performative aspect of identity-making and its constant dialogue with power structures.

In an interview with Charli Rose on the play *Topdog/Underdog*, Suzan-Lori Parks responds to the critique of writing stereotypical black characters by addressing the intricacies of representation when it comes to African American identity. Parks argues that if she had written about doctors and lawyers, she probably would have been equally criticized. The playwright points out that in the end, it is a matter of working out the meaning of representation on stage, and of having black actors and actresses to interpret black characters: "Most nights, after watching the play, because I've seen it so many times now, that's what the play is about to me: the opportunity to give two black guys the chance to work together and represent [on stage]" (Parks 2017, 12:40).

To conclude, the project "African American Drama on the Italian Stage" has contributed to opening a discussion on the political and cultural representation of black people in Italy, shedding light on the fact that black actors are still often confined to stereotypical roles. What is more, the project and the staging of the play showed the importance of pushing the boundaries of traditional Italian theatre programming, demanding a more diverse cultural offer

that reflects the multiplicity of stories and experiences of our present. This is a step towards seeing theatre as a place of participation, possibility and experimentation. Hopefully, this type of project will be the steppingstone to encourage theatrical productions to invest more in the work of talented black artists.

### References

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