



## 'Red, Black & Green: A Blues (rbGb)' review

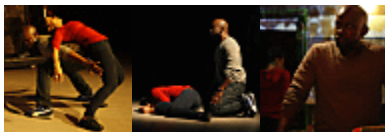
Robert Hurwitt, Chronicle Theater Critic

Saturday, October 15, 2011



Dylan Entelis / The Chronicle

Show creator Marc Bamuthi Joseph dances with Traci Tolmaire in "Red, Black & Green: A Blues" at San Francisco's Yerba Buena Center for the Arts.



**Red, Black & Green: A Blues (rbGb):** Multimedia performance. By Marc Bamuthi Joseph and the Living Word Project: Through Oct. 22. Yerba Buena Center for the Arts Forum, 701 Mission St., S.F. 90 minutes. \$20-\$25. (415) 978-2787. [www.ybca.org](http://www.ybca.org).

The sweet, soulful sounds of the blues fill the house, penetrating the heart as the poetry of Marc Bamuthi Joseph stirs the conscience. Tommy Shepherd's music is rich, varied and compelling. The four performers are magnetic, the dance is electrifying, and the impressively evolving set is a full participant in the action.

"Red, Black & Green," which opened Thursday at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts Forum, is a thing of beauty with a heart and mind to match. Created by Bamuthi Joseph and the Living Word Project, and produced by MAPP International, it's a synthesis of the work of its performers and other collaborators based on ideas, stories and found objects gleaned from the Life Is Living festivals Bamuthi Joseph organized in urban parks around the country.

A shared, vital passion infuses the compact piece, born of the rocky interface between all-inclusive environmental concerns and the immediate needs of the residents of poverty-, crime- and drug-plagued inner cities. Bamuthi Joseph encapsulates heady ideas and affecting personal stories in evocative raps, tales and blues lyrics to the pulsing found-object percussion and beatboxing of Shepherd (a.k.a. Emcee Soulati).

Set designer Theaster Gates croons heartfelt blues in counterpoint to Bamuthi Joseph's songs and raps. So does Traci Tolmaire, who executes Stacey Printz's expressive jazz choreography with seductive athleticism. Michael John Garcés' direction pulls all the disparate elements together to create an irresistibly compelling whole.

A mother's grief for a murdered son in Chicago takes center stage. An urban gardener fixes our attention in Houston, as does the story of the art of a recovered wino. Bamuthi Joseph spins a resonantly intimate tale of talking to his son about the fraught legacies of Tupac and the Black Panthers.

In a bold move that pays big dividends, Garcés opens the show with a half-hour prologue in which the audience can move in and around the set - four walls that make up a small cabin, already inhabited by the performers, singing, moving, speaking, sharing watermelon.

Composed of found objects, Gates' work is an evocative installation. It metamorphoses into different configurations throughout the show, augmented by David Szlasa's media design. Just as our up-close first look at it was an overture to a visual symphony, the bits of song and story heard then blossom to fill out the piece.

Going green meets and mates with the urgency of achieving environmental justice in "Red, Black & Green." The result is a piece as smart and provocative as it is breathtakingly beautiful.



## Marc Bamuthi Joseph gets the green movement to live, already

10.19.11 - 10:13 am | Caitlin Donohue |



Marc Bamuthi Joseph tells his story -- it's a good one -- through red, black, and GREEN: a blues  
PHOTO BY BETHANIE HINES PHOTOGRAPHY

Consider, if you will, the prosaic class issues in the green movement. The price of BART vs. driving, the utility of feeding one's children McDonald's after one's shift is over so you can play with them outside the kitchen, the inconvenient truth of Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Now add race, and stir.

Dancer-community activist-poet Marc Bamuthi Joseph did. The result was the Life is Living festival, which he stages in underserved 'hoods throughout the country (and took place in West Oakland Oct. 8). The festival's amazing, but its creation was a journey -- which Bamuthi has brilliantly set to stage with dancing and singing at the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts through Sat/22. It's called *red, black & GREEN: a blues* "I've got this male Liz Gilbert eat-pray-hip-hop kind of thing," recounts Bamuthi onstage during opening night at YBCA. Around him, bisected sharecropper's cabins swing open and shut, revealing their innards and front porches by turns. The set was made from repurposed materials and clay by Theaster Gates (new favorite name), who is

participating in double-time -- Gates is one of three supporting characters in the play, mainly contributing those eponymous blues in a rich voice from a porch.

Bamuthi's flip remark (it reaps a guffaw from the audience, one of many garnered from the play's dealings with race and class) evokes the difficulties that he and his "do-gooder" team faced in cobbling together Life is Living. Originally meant as an eco-festival -- Bamuthi's account of meeting with New Age Oakland environmental activists is gold -- the group shifted the traveling events focus to "the celebration of living."



**The cast of red, black & GREEN: the blues. Photo by Bethanie Hines**

The play could be read as an explanation of why this transformation took place. In the scene that serves as the performance's chorus, repeating through the play, Bamuthi talks to a grieving mom about his festival. "I ask a mother about environment/She tells me of guns/Of emotionally disabled boys."

She's got bigger fish to fry than hydroponic gardens. As does a sculptor: "He speaks to me of misters/Old men gathered to pastime/Play young/men games/Share news/Insult/Seed comfort/Cultivate friendship." A freezing crackhead in the New York winter: "I'm calling collect from tomorrow/track riding."

And you forget you're being taught (Bamuthi is fond of likening himself to a 10th grade teacher) because it's all gorgeous, real artists doing their real artist things. Characters recreate sunny day hip-hop cut-ups, but they also morph their bodies to evoke addiction, old age -- two miraculous transformations that showcase the talent in their bodies through the way they restrict their own mobility.

Asking about "what sustains life" instead of "what is sustainable" could be an important cognitive shift for the green movement -- one that would reactivate the choir and provide an entry point for people just coming to the green movement. Bamuthi was a featured artist for the NAACP's centennial anniversary celebration during Barack Obama's inauguration exercises. President Obama... I hear you're having some PR troubles. Were you listening to this guy?

*red, black & GREEN: a blues*  
Thu/20-Sat/22 7:30 p.m., \$10-\$25  
Yerba Buena Center for the Arts  
701 Mission, SF  
(415) 978-2787  
[www.ybca.org](http://www.ybca.org)



# Marc Bamuthi Joseph

October 20, 2011

by Kate Mattingly



From left to right Tommy Shepherd a.k.a. Emcee Soulati, Marc Bamuthi Joseph, and Theaster Gates

**Show information:** “red, black and GREEN: a blues” takes place at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts. Performances are at 7:30pm on October 20, 21, and 22. For more information, visit <http://ybca.org/marc-bamuthi-josephthe-living-word-project>

“red, black & GREEN: a blues,” by Marc Bamuthi Joseph, is a performance that explores identity and colors, politics and participation, and there’s probably no one better equipped than Bamuthi to create this work. He’s a community organizer, formidably talented artist, and co-founder of Life is Living, described in his biography as “a national series of one-day festivals designed to activate under-resourced parks and affirm peaceful urban life through hip hop arts and focused environmental action.”

For “red, black & GREEN: a blues” Bamuthi collaborated with director Michael John Garcés, set/installation designer Theaster Gates, and a team of others who contributed – visually and acoustically — to the production’s seamless grace and elegance. But it’s the stellar contributions of the cast of four (Bamuthi, Gates, Traci Tolmaire, and Tommy Shepherd a.k.a. Emcee Soulati) who turn the performance into a riveting commentary about how people have made abandoned parks into places of possibility. “red, black & GREEN: a blues” inspires each of us to look at the impact of our decisions. Anecdotes range from the story of Rick Lowe’s Project Row Houses to an explanation of a Tupac

documentary that Bamuthi gives his 9-year old son. Each scene sparks consideration of the fertile tension between history and theater, a chance to see again people, relationships, scenarios and ways in which meaning can be transformed through their retelling.



Bottom row, left to right: Gates, Traci Tolmaire, Shepherd. Above: Bamuthi

“red, black & GREEN: a blues” defies easy synopsis: it’s not only multi-disciplinary, but also multi-directional, encompassing past and current events. Tethered to locations where Life is Living takes place -- Chicago, Houston, New York, and Oakland – the performance use spoken word, rhythms, music, and dance to bring to life different people and encounters. The set by Gates is assembled and dissembled by the cast to provide different environments.

Beginning with an interactive first section that invites us to wander on the stage and get close to the set (this lasts about a half-hour), the cast is onstage for the entire production. The second section takes places in a proscenium-style arrangement with the four artists onstage.

After 90 minutes, I left the theater wondering if I had ever seen a production that so deeply honored people’s stories, interactions, hopes, obstacles, grief, and potential. “red, black & GREEN: a blues” is both affirmation and catalyst, a testament to unwavering commitment and creativity and a form of theater that triggers questions about if/how we consider the well-being of one another.



In a program essay by Berkeley professor Shannon Jackson, Gates is quoted as saying “While I may not be able to change the housing market or the surety of gentrification, I can offer questions within the landscape. To question, not by petitioning or organizing in the activist way, but by building and making good use of things forgotten.” Each decision within the work seems guided by this principle: from the set that appears to be built from discarded materials to the theatrical techniques that are created in order to engage audiences differently, more effectively.

The first section establishes both intimacy and responsibility. We are free to choose which actor or parts of the set we wish to observe, or to step back and see how the movement of the walls transforms the stage from the façade of a house to its interior spaces. The performers’ voices and rhythms create a glue that unites their presence, even when they’re not visible to one another. Bamuthi offers us slices of watermelon. I hear Gates before I see him sitting on a front porch; he is singing – gorgeously.

Initially compacted like a cube, suggesting a shotgun house, the walls appear worn, dilapidated, full of stories. As they separate, the audience finds itself in the midst of an interior and the sensation of being intimately involved with a situation becomes a through-line of the performance.

This approach to theater is not about complacently watching, but insists on interaction and consideration. At one point Bamuthi speaks about “practice as belief,” advocating for artists to dedicate themselves to values that connect with life through architecture, sculpture, dance, theater.

During the second part of the performance, words and images intertwine. Traci Tolmaire captivates as she morphs into different characters: a woman who oversees a community garden or a guy known as “the flower man.” The cast is phenomenally multitalented: singing, dancing, and speaking with conviction. Tommy Shepherd provides acoustic textures that complement the scenes, making rhythms on the surfaces of the set, beat-boxing, and embodying characters.



The production's details and transitions are extraordinary: television screens built into the set provide images that enrich the stories being told. During one scene Gates' profile is visible through a window, a glimpse of quiet perseverance. When the stories shift to New York City, the back wall becomes the interior view of a subway station. The design team included media designer David Szlasa, lighting designer James Clotfelter, choreographer Stacey Printz, composer Tommy Shepherd, documentary filmmaker Eli Jacobs-Fantauzzi, costume designer Mai-Lei Pecorrai, and sound designer Gregory Kuhn.

A day after the show, certain lines still reverberate: "it's a trick question" referring to whether or not to bring a mug to Starbucks (why would any environmentally concerned individual be in Starbucks?) or "the paradox of cultivating something you will never see" or "so culturally immune to our long slow suicide" that encapsulates our present condition.

But it's the last line that resonates most deeply: "If you look real close..."

What might we see? How would we respond? What could change?

# Bargain Bites

Our yearly roundup of the best places to eat cheap. Pullout section inside

# 96 Hours

Collector's poster: Ian Shults at Gallery Heist

SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE | 10.13.11-10.16.11 | 4-DAY WEEKEND ENTERTAINMENT

## Think local

Performance artist  
Bamuthi Joseph says  
changing the world  
starts at home

# Perform

## 'Red, Black & Green: A Blues (rbGb)': Multimedia piece tries to reconcile urban despair, environmental responsibility

By Nirmala Nataraj

SPECIAL TO THE CHRONICLE

Performance artist Marc Bamuthi Joseph says the first step to valuing our ecologically ravaged planet is valuing one's own community. The reconciliation between addressing the blights of urban communities and promoting sustainable living is at the heart of Bamuthi Joseph's latest work: "Red, Black & Green: A Blues (rbGb)."

The piece is part sculptural installation and part multimedia theatrical extravaganza. It is a poetic whirlwind of text, film, music, dance and a set designed by visual artist and vocalist Theaster Gates (composed entirely of repurposed building materials and clay sculptural objects). Bamuthi Joseph performs in the piece alongside Gates and dancer/actor Traci Tolmaire.

The work is a medley of personal stories that touches on how people of color and those who live in "at-risk" communities are underrepresented or altogether rendered invisible in the move toward environmental consciousness. The implicit idea that "If you're brown, you can't go green" is explored alongside social ills that pose more of an immediate threat to various communities than the current environmental crisis, Bamuthi Joseph says.

"What we wanted to do was reframe environmental health in terms of addressing social ecology," Bamuthi Joseph says. "Rather than putting going green at the center, the work has been about putting life at the center of the question of how to rethink sustainability. What we've been doing around the country is talking about the issues in the context of access to clean water and



Bethanie Hines Photography

Performance artist Marc Bamuthi Joseph (front) strives to reframe environmental health in terms of social justice.

**7:30 p.m. today-Sat. Through Oct. 22. \$5-\$25. YBCA Forum, 701 Mission St., S.F. (415) 978-2787. www.ybca.org.**

clean air ... and asking culture makers what they are doing to sustain life in their communities."

Bamuthi Joseph and his colleagues gathered interviews from "Life Is Living," a series of community festivals that he launched in urban parks throughout the country, combining activism, education and the arts. The performance is a reflection of Bamuthi Joseph's attempt to integrate the experiences, voices and language of hundreds of people.

"When it comes to what sustains life, everyone has an answer," says Bamuthi Joseph, who describes a poetic refrain in the piece in which respondents talk about the environment in the context of the issues that are most meaningful to them, from hip-hop to art to violence.

"The question of the environment is not about solar panels or polar bears — it's about people and their practices. The morbid truth is

that the planet will be here even if we're not, but what are we doing to sustain life?"

Bamuthi Joseph says that in his experiences in poor neighborhoods across the country, "the most innovative environmentalists aren't addressing ways to provide access to things like healthy food, even as they are finding ways to repurpose the land. ... In the end, our creativity isn't being sufficiently applied to sustainable land use in the way that it feeds our communities."

The piece emphasizes that compartmentalizing ecological and social responsibility creates a false dichotomy that might best be solved by bringing the issues back to a human scale.

"I'm not trying to oversimplify," Bamuthi Joseph says. "I know we need to recycle and compost and be mindful of our carbon footprint, but ultimately the investment we make in things like going green can't just be intellectual. ... Similar to art, it must be about provoking the heart and promoting interdependence."

E-mail comments to [96hours@sfgchronicle.com](mailto:96hours@sfgchronicle.com).

### THEATER

**Absolutely San Francisco** A musical comedy about lost love and the San Francisco experience. Ongoing. \$32-\$50. The Alcove Theater, 414 Mason St., Fifth Floor. (415) 992-8168. [www.absolutelysanfrancisco.com](http://www.absolutelysanfrancisco.com). (SF)

**Alice Down the Rwing**  
**Wrabbit Whole** A fictional account of the psychological unraveling of actresses Karen Light and Edna Barrón. Ends Sat. \$12-\$15. The Emerald Tablet, 80 Fresno St. (415) 500-2323. [www.brownpapertickets.com](http://www.brownpapertickets.com). (SF)

**Annie Get Your Gun** Irving Berlin's Annie Oakley tale. Ends Sun. \$10-\$25. Bethany University Theater, 800 Bethany Drive, Scotts Valley. (831) 818-1516. [www.svpaa.org](http://www.svpaa.org). (SB)

**Arrivederci Roma** "The Godfather" collides with Trannyshack in this hilarious transgender mafia story. Through Oct. 29. \$24. Stage Werx, 533 Sutter St. [www.wilywestproductions.com](http://www.wilywestproductions.com). (SF)

**Beach Blanket Babylon** Steve Silver's fast-paced, topical musical. Ongoing. \$25-\$130. Club Fugazi, 678 Green St. (415) 421-4222. [www.beachblanketbabylon.com](http://www.beachblanketbabylon.com). (SF)

**Bellwether** Ryan Rilette directs the premiere of Steve Yockey's suburban thriller, with Arwen Anderson and Gabe Marin starring in the tale of a gated community torn apart by a child's disappearance. Through Oct. 30. Marin Theatre Company, 397 Miller Ave., Mill Valley. (415) 388-5208. [www.marintheatre.org](http://www.marintheatre.org). (NB)

**Blood Is Mere Decoration: A Ritual for Liberation** Anthony Williams' solo show. 8 p.m. Thurs.-Sat. \$10-\$15. Intersection for the Arts, 925 Mission St. [www.brownpapertickets.com](http://www.brownpapertickets.com). (SF)

**Cabaret** A stark version of the Tony-winning musical. Berlin. Through Oct. 23. \$25-\$40. San Jose Stage, 490 S. First St., San Jose. (408) 283-7142. [www.sjstage.com](http://www.sjstage.com). (SB)

**Clementine in the Lower 9** TheatreWorks presents the premiere of Dan Dietz's blues-fueled look at a family struggling to re-form their lives in Katrina-clobbered New Orleans. Through Oct. 30. Mountain View Center for the Performing Arts, 500 Castro St., Mountain View. (650) 463-1960. [www.theatreworks.org](http://www.theatreworks.org). (PN)

**Confessions: Improv Comedy for the Soul** A new comedy inspired by real people's confessions performed by EndGames Players. Through Dec. 16. \$8-\$10. The Alcove Theater, 414 Mason St. [www.endgamesimprov.com](http://www.endgamesimprov.com). (SF)

**Damn Yankees** The classic musical. Through Oct. 29. \$14-\$18. Morgan Hill Playhouse & Theater, 17090 Monterey Road, Morgan Hill. (408) 782-8087. [www.svct.org](http://www.svct.org). (SB)

**"Day of Absence" and "Almost Nothing"** Lorraine Hansberry Theatre opens its season in its new home with two one-acts, a revival of Douglas Turner Ward's satire about what happens when all the black people disappear, and the North American premiere of Marcos Barbosa's tale of a couple recounting a fatal incident. Fri.-Nov. 20. Lorraine Hansberry Theatre, 450 Post St. (415) 474-8800. [www.lhtsf.org](http://www.lhtsf.org). (SF)

**Death of a Player** Filipina American women's theater group show pushing the idea that in living life to the fullest, one must die to fully live. Through Oct. 29. \$15-\$20. Bindlestiff Studio, 185 Sixth St. (415) 255-0440. [www.bindlestiffstudio.org](http://www.bindlestiffstudio.org).

**A Delicate Balance** Artistic Director Tom Ross directs Edward Albee's unsettling first Pulitzer Prize-winner to open Aurora Theatre's 20th season. Through Oct. 23. Aurora Theatre, 2081 Addison St., Berkeley. (510) 843-4822. [www.auroratheatre.org](http://www.auroratheatre.org). (EB)

**Desdemona: A Play About a Handkerchief** Paula Vogel gives a glimpse of "real" life on Cyprus and what really goes on behind closed doors while Othello is being destroyed by his jealousy. Through Nov. 5. \$15-\$35. Boxcar Theatre Playhouse, 505 Natoma St. (415) 776-1747. [www.boxcartheatre.org](http://www.boxcartheatre.org). (SF)

**Faces of Nature** Rosangela Silvestre's solo show. 7:30 p.m. Sun. \$15. Dance Mission Theater, 3316 24th St. [www.brownpapertickets.com](http://www.brownpapertickets.com). (SF)

**Frankenstein** The Independent Eye presents a new staging of Mary Shelley's classic novel adapted by Conrad Bishop & Elizabeth Fuller featuring live actors, live-size puppets, poetry, music and video elements. Through Oct. 30. \$20. 6th Street Playhouse, 52 W. Sixth St., Santa Rosa. (707) 523-4185. [www.6thstreetplayhouse.com](http://www.6thstreetplayhouse.com). (NB)



## Artist tackles environmental injustice in new production

By JOY SEWING, STAFF WRITER

Updated 06:12 p.m., Friday, October 28, 2011



Marc Bamuthi Joseph, performance artist and spoken word poet is coming back to Houston for his show rbGb (red black & GREEN: a blues) at the University of Houston in November. (Alan Warren, For the Chronicle) Photo: Alan Warren / ©2011 Houston Chronicle

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For an artist so impassioned about his craft, Marc Bamuthi Joseph is remarkably contained.

The poet, dancer, actor, activist and hip-hop enthusiast rarely raises his voice above a deep, soothing tone.

Each statement seems more reflective than the previous one, particularly when he talks about his new production, *red, black & GREEN: a blues*, which will be performed Friday-Saturday at University of Houston's Cynthia Woods Mitchell Center for the Arts.

Conceptually, the piece is abstract, a mix of art and performance investigating the issue of environmental justice in the African-American community. Joseph uses sculpture, documentary film, photography, verse and contemporary dance to illustrate characters in four areas - Houston, Chicago, Harlem and Oakland, Calif. The production itself extends the "green" theme, as it's made of "100 percent Chicago garbage," such as old mattresses, denim, hoses and other materials.

"This piece brings humanity and soul to the 'green' conversation," Bamuthi, 35, said, during a recent visit to UH to teach a master dance class and complete work on his production. "I want people to see that we are all reflected in the environment. It's so easy to associate 'green' with things, like recycling, solar panels and water conservation. It's a dissolution of the boundary between 'green' things and people."

The production is divided into three parts. The first, "the colored museum," invites the audience on stage to peer into the windows of a row house, much like one would view a gallery exhibit. After 20 minutes, the audience returns to its seats for the "color and muses" section, in which Bamuthi and three other artists play out a dialogue as they travel through the four areas. Each location is represented by music: gospel in Chicago, the blues in Houston, hip-hop in New York and funk in Oakland.

Along the way, characters unfold and their efforts to overcome adversity are revealed. For example, a Sudanese mother recounts her flight from genocide in Darfur to Chicago, where she hopes for a better life. But her teen son is tragically murdered.

"How can we focus on environmental justice, when the soil beneath the concrete has black blood on it?" Bamuthi asked. "That's the dilemma."

The final section of the piece is a discussion between the audience and the artists.

"Art is one of the best ways for the University of Houston to connect with its neighbors and activate conversation and change," said Karen Farber, director of the Cynthia Woods Mitchell Center for the Arts. "We bring innovative artists, such as Marc Bamuthi Joseph, to Houston to deepen our community connections and build on our city's organic creativity."

Born in New York to Haitian immigrants, Bamuthi grew up around burgeoning hip-hop music and culture and also appeared in several Broadway shows as a young actor.

"The soundtrack to my political awakening and consciousness was hip-hop music and cinema," he said. "I grew up in a very volatile time, with hip-hop in the background. There was a rage of war on the under class, and I didn't have vocabulary for that until KRS-One spit it out. Then Chuck D (of the rap group Public Enemy), then came visual art of Keith Haring or Jean-Michel Basquiat. Then, literature by Toni Morrison, Richard Wright and the poetry of Nikki Giovanni and Sonia Sanchez."

In 1997, he graduated from Morehouse College in Atlanta and moved to the San Francisco area, where now lives. He also earned a master's degree in education from San Francisco State University.

Bamuthi currently serves as artistic director for Youth Speaks, a nonprofit organization designed to nurture self-expression through spoken-word performances, education and youth development programs. Youth Speaks involves about 50,000 Bay-area teens each year and has created similar programs in nearly 50 U.S. cities. He was also artistic director of the HBO documentary *Russell Simmons Presents Brave New Voices*.

In 2006, he received the United States Artists Rockefeller Fellowship, which annually recognizes 50 of the country's greatest living artists with \$50,000 grants. The next year, Bamuthi was featured on the cover of Smithsonian Magazine as one of America's top young innovators in arts and sciences. In May, he received the 2011 Alpert Award in Theater, with a \$75,000 grant.

Bamuthi, who has two children and recently became engaged to be married next year, said he was inspired to write *red, black & GREEN: a blues* during his work with Youth Speaks' Life Is Living community and arts festivals held across the country, including at one at Houston's Emancipation Park in 2010.

He also found inspiration living in Houston as an artist-in-residence at University of Houston's Mitchell Center for the Arts in 2010. He spent nearly three months residing at Third Ward's Project Row Houses, a neighborhood-based nonprofit art and cultural organization. Project Row Houses' founder and artist Rick Lowe is also a character featured in Bamuthi's production.

One of the environmental issues in African-American communities is food injustice, Bamuthi said.

"It not just about what we eat, but the distance we have to drive to get to produce. Take a look at right here in Third Ward, there are a number of liquor stores, but where can you get fresh vegetables? It's very similar in Oakland and other major cities. How can you join the green movement when you don't have access to the proper foods to nourish your children?"

In essence, *red, black & GREEN: a blues* is an effort understand such issues and why the environmental movement for a greener, more sustainable life is often absent in the black community, Bamuthi said.

"What sustains life in the black community isn't a careful consideration of polar bears or the Amazon rain forest. What sustains life is playing dominoes, making sure there are listening ears for music and putting food on our tables," he said. "To be environmentally just indicates you believe in tomorrow. For many African Americans in urban communities, today is a struggle," he said.

"The reality is you can't go green until you hold a respect for life and can focus on tomorrow. Let's start there."

## Living Word Without Walls

### **Marc Bamuthi Joseph takes the environment as his muse in *red, black, & GREEN: a blues*.**

*By Rachel Swan*

Some directors break down the fourth wall; some never erect walls in the first place. Marc Bamuthi Joseph belongs to the latter school. Over the last decade he's produced a spate of spoken-wordy, dance-driven, theatrical pieces, beginning with *De/Cipher* in 2001, and following in short order with 2002's *No Man's Land*, which paved the way for several evening-length "choreopoems": *Word Becomes Flesh*, *Scourge*, and *the break/s*. For the last three years, he's also mounted a series of festivals in different parts of the country under the banner "Living Word."

The main purpose of these events, Joseph says, is to bring environmentalism to inner-city neighborhoods, using hip-hop as a hook — thus, they always feature well-known rap artists like Pharoahe Monch and Mos Def, who all perform on solar panel stages, using equipment fueled by bicycle power or biodiesel engines. The fact that Joseph's environmental theme usually gets subsumed within the whole spectacle doesn't seem to bother him. He says they're supposed to serve as an interactive experience, rather than a pedagogical tool.

That's also the concept behind his new piece, *red, black, & GREEN: a blues*, which runs this week at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts. Inspired by Joseph's experiences traveling to 'hoods throughout the country and talking to people about environmentalism, it has an extremely basic plot that leads into a much larger dialogue. Joseph addresses the problem — or "complication," as it were — very early on in his script. One of the first lines is, "Me and my not-for-profit community activist do-gooder friends are throwing an eco-party in the 'hood."

There's not that much drama in event production, even an event as large in scale and as bold in execution as the Living Word Festival. But it does spur a lot of interesting conversations, and those form the dramatic meat of *red, black, & GREEN*. "It's a performed documentary of the process of making 'Life Is Living' [aka Living Word]," Joseph said. He went on to list some of the terms we associate with the word "environment": global warming, polar bears, solar panels. "And we really bring it down," he said. "Environment is gravel. Environment is people. I ask a sculptor about

environment, he tells me of 'misters.' Environment is about getting older. Environment is about guns in the black community. You know what I mean?"

Ergo, the moral: "that environment is more about social ecology than global ecology." But that's only one part of the play. It's actually structured as a triptych, beginning with an interactive art exhibit that doubles as the set, fabricated by Joseph's main collaborator and "super-diesel visual arts guy," Theaster Gates. Audience members get to walk inside four houses, each of which represents one of the cities that hosts the Living Word Festival (Oakland, Houston, Harlem, and Chicago). Actors will be onstage in character, performing parts of the story in Act II — Joseph calls this "echoes of the 'as yet.'"

Act III is a talk-back with the performers, who include Gates, dancer Traci Tolmaire, beatboxer and percussionist Tommy Shepherd, filmmaker Eli Jacobs-Fantauzzi, and videographer David Szlasa. But, like every other element in *red, black, & GREEN*, it's structured in a nontraditional way. Rather than lecture the audience, the actors invite patrons onstage for a fully participatory discussion, complete with refreshments. He says that type of after-show debriefing fits the "social ecology" theme: It provides structure, without walls. *red, black, & GREEN: a blues* runs through October 22 at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts (701 Mission St., San Francisco). 7:30 p.m., \$5, \$25. YBCA.org

# [The East Bay Arts and Culture Review](#)

*Examining the Bay Area's events through a cultural lens*

## **Marc Bamuthi Joseph / The Living Word Project enthrall with 'red, black, and GREEN: a blues (rbGb)'**

By Maia Wolins, Fine Arts Correspondent on Thursday, October 20, 2011

An unequivocal standing ovation erupted tonight for Marc Bamuthi Joseph and the Living Word Project's 'red, black and GREEN: a blues (rbGb)' at the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts.

*rbGB* is an inspiring example of the amazing multimedia work that can be done to bring communities into the Green, and the conversations that should happen with people of all colors to help humanity survive and thrive.

Bamuthi Joseph captivates his audience from the moment they step into the room to find the performers at home in and on unique, colorful installations. The first section of the performance thus begins with the audience mere inches from the artists. At such close range, we are reminded that we are not mere onlookers of the performance nor of life.



Such an introduction creatively sets a precedent for the whole evening, where audience members are consistently connected as participants of a critical discussion in new light: how do we sustain

the human race? What role do cultural roots and history play? And who is responsible for this task?

We find our way to our seats only to fall into a whirlwind of true stories and fictionalized memoirs; snatches of conversations and breathtaking dance duets; rousing vocals and indelible spoken word; narratives that gracefully built on each other in the most beautifully crafted manner of telling a story.

The homeless user, caught in a cycle of drugs, dropping hard truths about his situation in a whisper caught by nervous passersby too busy to care.

A mother, too devastated by the loss of her son to feel compassion for the question of climate change.

The boy who was like good brown earth that would be prized in a garden, but whose life was taken in a city where it seems that nothing can grow.

The hopeful organizer of a sustainability initiative, pummeled with familiar guilt trips about faucets and organic produce who stops us with humor to ask- how are those Green dreams possible?

This question is highly relevant to many communities across America, where access to good, affordable food and education is unthinkable- let alone access to the necessary means for sustainability.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph's eloquent response to the show's question is built upon a narrative swirl of energy, humor, sadness, passion, and hope: "Red state /Blues people /Use art /To shift Black /Towards Green."

Tonight's performance was a powerful conversation with a clearly supportive audience, and I hope that *rbGb* and similar conversations can be introduced widely into schools and communities across the country- particularly those that might not normally have access to such an incredible event.

There are only two more days to catch the unparalleled *rbGb* performance at YBCA, and the performers are moving out with delectable energy that is not to be missed. A must-see for anyone who cares for this earth and for unbelievable performances:

Last two shows: Oct 21-22, 7:30pm, Yerba Buena Center for the Arts.

*EBAC thanks the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts for access to the show.*

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Marc Bamuthi Joseph: Sustaining Life Is Going Green

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## Marc Bamuthi Joseph: Sustaining Life Is Going Green

By: Simone Jacobson

Posted: February 8, 2011 at 12:02 AM

*The Root* talks to performing artist and educator Marc Bamuthi Joseph, who takes a different, more inclusive approach to promoting the environment in urban communities.

When we think of the green movement, using hip-hop theater as a community-organizing tool may be the last thing to come to mind. But after the EPA struck down a California law raising statewide emissions standards in 2007, Bay Area performer, director and educator Marc Bamuthi Joseph was moved to action.

Frustrated by the lack of brown voices in the sustainable-energy struggle, he launched a series of eco-festivals, called Life Is Living, in urban parks around the U.S. The recipient of the Rockefeller Fellowship, recognizing the country's 50 "greatest living artists," Bamuthi was also recently named one of America's Top Young Innovators in the Arts and Sciences by Smithsonian magazine.

Bamuthi says that "going green" is a phrase abused by corporations, whereas "sustaining life" is universally accessible. That's the theory behind Life Is Living: Pair under-resourced communities with green-action agencies to create dialogue around living healthier lives. The result? *red, black and GREEN: a blues (rbGb)*, a multimedia ensemble performance incorporating the voices of hundreds of community members, which will premiere in San Francisco in October and then tour throughout the U.S. in 2012.

Between meetings and dropping his son off at school, Bamuthi chatted with *The Root*. We challenged him to explain why Michelle Obama, Spike Lee and the EPA should see his show, and asked about the dreaded "r" word: race.

*The Root*: On your site, [LifeIsLiving.org](http://LifeIsLiving.org), you're quoted as saying, "My work changes, but philosophically my goals do not." What are your goals for Life Is Living?

**Marc Bamuthi Joseph**: At heart I'm a 10th-grade English teacher. Inside the classroom, our primary purpose isn't to force-feed information or to manufacture a certain kind of human being. It's to be expansive and to create as many different points of access as possible. So the ultimate goal of [my approach to] the arts is to create and foster environments for social change. More than learning, the goal is to create and conduct safe spaces for growth.

**TR**: What was the process for creating the Life Is Living festivals? Why you, and why now?

**MBJ**: The "aha moment" came in December of 2007. The EPA, as a proxy for the Bush administration, struck down a California law that raised emission standards for cars in the state. I remember sitting and grieving that this was happening. I thought [that something that] was missing in terms of the environmental conversation was a proper integration of all communities. I thought that the more segregated the environmental movement, the less powerful it was. So I endeavored to put on an environmental concert in an under-resourced park.

It ended up being a transposition of my values in the public space. What we did from that point forward was to have a much more inclusive methodology to develop these shows. So the methodology changed from throwing a concert in the park to thinking about environment as a community-organizing model.

That became a message by which we entertained strategic partners in key cities and invited them to host, at first small committees, and then ever growing community partners that all had a stake inside of the question, "What sustains life in your community?" Consequently, the level of investment was much higher than when we were just putting on a show in the park.

**TR:** How has the project changed how you live, and what sustains life for you?

**MBJ:** Love sustains me. Particularly, care of family. I think the main way I've been changed by this festival is that in the act of producing the festival, I seek and incorporate the ideas and practices of others.

**TR:** You're calling your forthcoming performance piece *red, black and GREEN: a blues*. What makes it "a blues"?

**MBJ:** The form makes it a blues. A blues has thematic unity, and it also has structural unity. The piece is about seasonal cycles and coming back to refrains. "Red, black and green" obviously references [Marcus] Garvey's flag and the notion of a nascent Pan-Africanism, or more specifically a nascent Pan-African Americanism. The blues refers to a cultural structure and a modality that's persistent in African-American arts aesthetics.

**TR:** During your recent performance at [Dance Place](#) in Washington, D.C., you referenced the uncomfortable issue of your own "whiteness." Which artists are "keeping it real" on race and pushing the conversation forward?

**MBJ:** In the United States, our racial history makes it impossible not to deal with race, either in an implicit or explicit way. My favorite play about race was written by a young woman named Chinaka Hodge, whose play, *Mirrors in Every Corner*, I directed. At the center of the play is a black family in Oakland, a mother who has three kids -- an older son, a set of twins -- and then [she] gives birth to a daughter who is white.

It's kind of like Octavia Butler, sci-fi style, but not. The folks who are doing the most innovative work on race aren't naming it as such, or aren't dealing with binary or niche structures. They're really acknowledging all the in-betweens we're dealing with.

**TR:** Let's say you can reserve the whole front row of the audience for *rbGb*, and whoever you invite is definitely coming. Who absolutely has to see this work?

**MBJ:** Michelle Obama, for sure. Not only because she is an amazing first lady and super fly and I love her, but also because of her emphasis on national health. Spike Lee because I think that he is currently the Ken Burns of African America. I don't think in the last 15 years there's been a documentarian as agile and as capable of emotional resonance as Spike. I would say the heads of the Environmental Protection Agency and the Department of Agriculture.

The rest of the folks -- outside of my artistic heroes, like Bill T. Jones and Nikki Giovanni -- would be the men and women who frequent the parks that hosted Life Is Living. You know, the folks playing bones in Oakland. The kids playing baseball in Harlem. The men playing bid whist in Houston.

*Simone Jacobson is managing editor at [Words, Beats, Life: The Global Journal of Hip-Hop Culture](#) and founder of [Sulu DC](#). A performer, curator and scholar, her master's thesis, "America's Cultural Illiteracy: Is Hip-Hop the Best Tutor?" addressed U.S. and global hip-hop history and culture, cultural diplomacy and the overlap of the two: hip-hop diplomacy.*

# **Marc Bamuthi Joseph: Less About Green, More About Life**

8/19/2011 4:12:43 PM

by Margret Aldrich

Forget about the green movement; environmentalism is a social movement that impacts us all. So says Bay Area spoken-word and hip-hop theater artist Marc Bamuthi Joseph, who aims to integrate environmentalism and sustainability into all communities—urban and suburban, poor and privileged.

Green supporters are lucky to have the dynamic and dedicated Bamuthi in their corner. The New York native and former English teacher is a recipient of the Rockefeller Fellowship, which recognizes the country's 50 greatest living artists, and was named one of America's Top Young Innovators in the Arts and Sciences by *Smithsonian* magazine. This week, we sat down at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis to talk about his efforts to start a conversation between underserved communities, green-action agencies, and the arts world.

“I want to engage the question of environment, specifically in black and brown communities, in a different kind of way,” Bamuthi explains. “The process of working in environment really illuminates how isolated and compartmentalized the green sector is, specifically in its messaging.” He continues:

The idea is that environmentalism is a social movement; we’re all impacted by it. The question is, how do we shift messaging? How do we create as many different points of access as possible to enter into the question of sustainability?

Our movement has to be less about “green” and more about a shared value—life. But in some cases life isn’t a shared value. In some cases when you’re dealing with communities with crazy dropout rates, high infant mortality rates, high murder rates, life is not necessarily a practiced value. So, how do you create opportunities for folks to recognize the value of life through everyday activity?

Bamuthi answered this question by organizing the urban eco-festival Life Is Living, which incorporates urban performance, intergenerational health, and environmental action. So far, the festival has visited Oakland, Houston, Chicago, New York, and San Francisco.

Inspired by Life Is Living, the Walker Art Center invited Bamuthi to join their ongoing Open Field project to create an event called The Living Classroom—an outdoor commons of local and national artists exploring the question, “What sustains life in your community?”

The Living Classroom is a perfect anecdote to what Bamuthi calls our “intellectually risk-averse society,” mixing art and sustainability issues in accessible ways. Photographer Wing Young Huie, for example, coordinates a ping-pong tournament on the Walker lawn and encourages passersby to participate in communal karaoke. Spoken-word artist Desdamona works with others on a collective collage made up of magazine cut-outs, notes, and sketches. Artist and urban designer Rick Lowe plays dominoes with strangers at a picnic table and chats about healthy living. Later, there are hip-hop performances, Puerto Rican dancing, and a sneak preview of Bamuthi’s new work *red, black and GREEN: a blues*.

A ping-pong ball bounces over to the shady spot where Bamuthi and I are sitting. “And so you see,” he says, gesturing to the eclectic activities happening around us, “life includes drawing and dominoes and rolling down hills, and it also involves alternative energy and conservation and food activism and poetry and art. The idea is to place all these things on the same continuum so that there’s less isolation and a greater emphasis on interdependence—socially, intellectually, and practically.”

*Image by Bethanie Hines, courtesy of the Walker Art Center.*

SPECIAL ISSUE

# Smithsonian

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## 37 UNDER 36



# AMERICA'S YOUNG INNOVATORS

IN THE ARTS AND SCIENCES

Innovators

## Stepping Up

Even as he travels the world, dancer and hip-hopper Marc Bamuthi Joseph has stayed close to his musical roots

By Derk Richardson

San Francisco's Intersection for the Arts was throbbing with the beats of deep soul and house music. In a corner, a boy was break dancing, gleefully spinning on his back, oblivious to passersby slowly gravitating toward the DJ booth in the gallery exhibit, a politically charged multimedia work about the history of cocoa and chocolate.



Mark Richards

The youngster might have been Marc Bamuthi Joseph 25 years ago. In fact, he was Joseph's 5-year-old son, M'Kai. Joseph, curator and emcee for the program about to start, was nearby—feet sliding to the beat beneath his gracefully gyrating hips, arms waving weightlessly as hands fluttered in welcoming gestures. Like his son, Joseph seemed in perpetual motion that night, the launch of the 2007 Hybrid Project, a yearlong program of performances and workshops integrating dance, poetry, theater, and live and DJ'd music.

Joseph, 31, is the Hybrid Project's lead artist. He is also artistic director of the Bay Area's Youth Speaks organization, which encourages activism through the arts, and its Living Word Project theater company. Though he is perfectly at home in those positions, he is hardly ever at home. Performances, dance apprenticeships, teaching and artist residencies keep him hopping around the United States and as far afield as France, Senegal, Bosnia, Cuba and Japan. The New York City native has been on the move since childhood.

Like a character out of the movie *Fame*, Joseph seemed destined for stardom from the time, at age 10, he understudied Savion Glover in the Tony Award-winning Broadway musical *The Tap Dance Kid*, then assumed the lead in the national touring company. But in the early 1990s, after dabbling in television, Joseph embarked on a search for an artistic identity that had less to do with the box office and more to do with what he calls "shifting the culture"—away from the compartmentalization of the arts and toward their fuller integration into daily life. That journey was rooted in the hip-hop culture of rap, DJing, b-boying (break dancing) and graffiti that arose in the Bronx in the late 1970s and grew into a nationwide movement in the 1980s.

"I have non-hip-hop-related memories of being 3," Joseph says, laughing, "but it's the music that I started listening to at 6, 7 years old. It's pretty much always been the soundtrack for my life."

Joseph's trajectory toward theatrical hip-hop—he is an internationally acclaimed performer who pushes the African griot (storyteller) tradition into the future with music, dance and visuals—rose steeply after he earned his B.A. in English literature at Morehouse College, in Atlanta, in 1997. A teaching fellowship took him that same year to the San Francisco Bay Area, where he quickly found a calling in the world of spoken-word poetry.

Joseph's ambitious solo works integrating spoken word and dance won him the 1999 National Poetry Slam Championship (with Team San Francisco) and made him three-time San Francisco Poetry Grand Slam champion. His breakthrough "Word Becomes Flesh" (2003) took the form of spoken and danced letters from an unwed father to his unborn son; "Scourge" (2005) addressed issues of identity he faced as a U.S.-born son of Haitian parents. "the break/s" is a personal spin on Jeff Chang's *Can't Stop Won't Stop*, the American Book Award-winning history of hip-hop.

Joseph read Chang's book in 2005 while in Paris working with Africa-based choreographers. "I had the epiphany that hip-hop has really impelled me and enabled my travel throughout the world," he says. "Jeff's book articulates, better than anything I've ever encountered, the full breadth of why we are what we are, and how we got to this place."

Self-scrutiny is the jumping-off point for Joseph's work. "The autobiography is a point of access for audiences, but it's also a point of access for me," he says. "I think the vulnerability—but specifically the urgency—onstage makes for the most compelling art in this idiom. If there isn't something at stake personally in making the art, then why bother?"

Despite the rapidly rising arc of his stage career, Joseph remains committed to teaching, especially as a mentor to Youth Speaks and the Living Word Project. "Working with the young people always inspires me; it pushes my humanity, it forces me to find creative means of exciting the imagination," he says. "That's really where it begins. I think there's no better place in our culture than the high-school classroom to introduce new ways of thinking."

*Derk Richardson is senior editor at Oakland Magazine and hosts a music show on KPFA-FM in Berkeley, California.*

**The New York Times**

# Finding the Poetry in the Industrial Past

By DAVID COLMAN

Published: October 7, 2011 Top of Form

LIKE many people today, from amateurs to avant-garde architects, Theaster Gates has a soft spot for the glory days of the American industrial past. Mr. Gates, a Chicago artist, salvages what he can from the warehouses and factories that are being torn down in and around the city, many of which date to the turn of the last century. Sturdy old wood timbers have proved a special weakness.



Peter Hoffman for The New York Times  
Theaster Gates, a Chicago artist, made a ladder of old industrial beams.

“There are so many raw materials available now, but this happens to be a really useful building block that carries on its surface the years and years of use,” Mr. Gates, 38, said. He has used these timbers, along with other salvaged materials, in building his home on the South Side, as well as a neighborhood art center aimed at helping bring new life and hope to a long-derelict area.