

# New York Theatre Review

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**Cameron Page on *Word Becomes Flesh*, presented by 651 Arts, produced by the 2012 Under the Radar Festival at the Public Theater**



Some plays seem, at first glance, too specific to be successful. “A series of letters to an unborn son,” for example, falls into this category.

That phrase --- taken from promotional materials for *Word Becomes Flesh* --- broadcasts a narrowness of theme that seems bound to alienate certain people. People uninterested in parenthood, for example (of which there are many in New York City), might think twice before buying tickets.

But that would be unfortunate. *Word Becomes Flesh*, an ensemble work of dance, theater, and hip-hop now playing at the Public Theater as part of the Under the Radar festival, manages to transcend its stated theme without ever leaving it.

In addition to exploring the father-unborn son relationship, the play touches on abortion, domestic violence, slavery, infidelity, and even the father-daughter relationship. In less capable hands the 80-minute production might meander or scatter. But Joseph artfully manages to connect each spoke to the hub of his theme: the challenge of fathering a black child in America.

The piece was written in 2003, when Mr. Joseph’s girlfriend became pregnant. His impending fatherhood, crashing down on him over weeks and months like a slow-motion tsunami, was the source of inspiration--- or perhaps source of stress is a better term for it --- that led to *Word Becomes Flesh*.



The play dwells on the tug-of-war between what one should do and what one wants to do; between the duties of fatherhood and the impulse to flee them. Joseph draws a parallel between this tension and the general condition of African-Americans today. In a moving, wordless montage, he contrasts the anxiety a black man feels inside with the tie-straightening smile he is forced to wear in public.

He seems to be telling the men in the audience: If you ever got your girlfriend pregnant, you understand what it's like to be black in America.

There's no shortage of anger in this play: at the crimes of history, at Joseph's own absent father, at the myriad injustices that stack the deck against a black male before he is even born. Joseph manages the trick of expressing this anger on stage, giving full-throated voice to it, bringing it (to use one of his phrases) into "the spoken world," without alienating the audience in the process. Rather than merely shout his anger at us, Joseph rouses in us the anger that enrages him.



But there's no hint of self-righteousness here, because Joseph is willing to shine the harsh beam of criticism on himself too. He stares his own flaws in the face, sharing his darkest thoughts with a wincingly brutal honesty. In one of the play's more uncomfortable moments, he confesses a dark fantasy about the mother losing the child.

The credit for the production's success does not all belong with Mr. Joseph. The ensemble is uniformly strong, with an impressive range of dancing and acting abilities throughout. Although *Word Becomes Flesh* was originally developed as a monologue, the two- and five-man dance pieces, with their muscular yet smooth choreography, now seem integral to the work.

There are echoes here of Ntozake Shange's *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow is Enuf* (which premiered Off-Broadway at the Public Theater in 1976). Not just the content, but the form: the ensemble is perpetually merging and splitting, joining together as a group and then addressing the audience individually. Each nameless actor seems to have his own story, but each of these stories represents a facet of the author's self: the faithless lover, the greedy trickster, the gentle partner.

In one of the most stomach-churning sections of this "evening-length choreopoem" (another homage to Shange?), the ensemble transforms itself into a motley clump of deformed, demented half-wits. Bathed in red as though writhing their way up from hell, they tell the history of the world as a cynical marriage between racism and capitalism. It's gripping, insightful, and somehow funny at the same time.

Any writer will tell you that greatness is in the details. Marc Bamuthi Joseph's "letters to his unborn son" are full of specific details, and you don't have to be a parent, or even plan to have children, to be enriched by them.

The New York Times

## Arts Beat

The Culture at Large

January 6, 2012, 2:39 pm

# Under the Radar: 5 Questions About ‘Word Becomes Flesh’

By *ERIK PIEPENBURG*



Jati LindsayA scene from “Word Becomes Flesh,” part of the Under the Radar festival at the Public Theater.

This year’s Under the Radar festival will be a homecoming for Marc Bamuthi Joseph. His 2003 spoken word piece, “Word Becomes Flesh,” a one-man show told as a series of letters from fathers to their unborn sons, returns to the festival lineup after being presented at the first Under the Radar in 2005. (It also had a run at the former Dance Theater Workshop in 2004.)

This time, instead of performing solo, Mr. Joseph will be directing a five-man ensemble in a reimagined version of the poetry and hip-hop-inflected show. During a recent rehearsal, Mr. Joseph, who is based in Oakland, Calif., spoke with ArtsBeat about stepping back from his own work and letting others speak for him. Following are excerpts from the conversation.

**Q.**

*You've been a part of this show for many years. Is it hard for you to hand it over to another group of people to perform?*

**A.**

Presented as an ensemble it falls more in the tradition of "For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/When the Rainbow Is Enuf," a choreo-poem, with many bodies exercising one narrative. I think it works a lot better that way.

Having five young black men on stage together is both tragic and romantic, really beautiful to see. Not only does my body thank me but I'm thankful as an activist and an African-American artist to see the spectacle of black intellect communicated by five black men in this way.

**Q.**

*It sounds like one of the reasons you aren't performing this piece is because it's so physically demanding.*

**A.**

I believe in art that sweats. There's a muscularity that is required in moving and speaking at the pace and velocity and vigor that's demanded by this work.

**Q.**

*Are you a father?*

**A.**

I am. My piece was inspired by what I was experiencing when my son, M'kai, who's 10, was in the womb. I also have a daughter, Nanea, who's six. I think what makes the piece great is that everybody has a birth story. We're all connected to our individual birth myths. During that story, so much of the focus is, deservedly, on the other. But there's also a transformation and a transition that happens with most men, or any partner who isn't actually carrying the child.

I found myself 10 years ago not really having an adequate vessel for my personal transformation. I found the medium was to write these letters to this kid I hadn't met yet.

**Q.**

*Why focus your show on men's relationships to their sons? Why not also include their daughters?*

**A.**

There is an underreported narrative related to the pathology of absentee fathers...A lot of that is about a lack of communication between fathers and sons, men specifically. There's a way that the gender specificity in this piece addresses a larger social void.

There's also a certain poetry in acknowledging this continuum between, in my case, my grandfather, father, myself and my son, a continuum that continues relative to the pathologies that plague our demographic.

**Q.**

*Has the piece changed at all in the years since you first brought it to New York?*

**A.**

When it was first presented here we were at the beginning of Bush's second term. It was the beginning of the beginning, if you know what I mean, in terms of the political landscape.

What I like about bringing the piece back this time is that it still calls for and inspires a certain level of collective compassion. Our politics have changed dramatically, but the piece itself doesn't feel any more or less incongruent. It feels like it fits harmoniously. It has an emotional landing place.

## ***The Maui News***

### **'Word Becomes Flesh' becomes awesome**

November 17, 2011

By MICHAEL PULLIAM

Wow! Just wow. That's a pretty mundane comment, but I'm literally speechless over Marc Bamuthi Joseph's "Word Becomes Flesh." Though the attendance was sparse, the Sunday night audience at the Maui Arts & Cultural Center's Castle Theater was a veritable who's who in the Maui art world. Essentially it was a performance for artists, writers and performers. The collective consensus of those creative types was complete awe, a silent exit as everyone contemplated what it was that we had just experienced.

Not to slight Maui theater, but Joseph's production is the kind of quality Maui should aspire to. From the perfection of all things technical to the another-level performers themselves, "Word Becomes Flesh" may be the most impressive show presented on the island in years. Joseph describes his new medium as a "choreo-poem," which is a good summation except that the effect is much richer than poetry combined with dance. It is sort of like a hip-hop opera, but without any singing if that makes sense. It also attacks hip-hop music and its culture, even while utilizing them.

"Word Becomes Flesh" is poetic prose and political statements surrounding a black male expecting his first child. Five actors play that one man: Dahlak Brathwaite, Daveed Diggs, Khalil Anthony, Michael Wayne Turner III and B. Yung. Dion Decibels DJs from onstage, providing the soundtrack to each "choreo-poem."

The dialogue and subject matter of the play are highly controversial and much of what's said can't be put in print. The power of African-Americans criticizing themselves in a politically incorrect way is at times shocking and it was only fitting that excerpts from a Malcolm X speech were used as an audio accompaniment as the talented cast explored racism. Powerful words are presented as a dance with a rhythmic score of beats and bits of melody. Each performer is an independent star in his own right, but the troupe melds into one being. By show's end it became difficult to remember who did what; it truly became one man with five aspects of his journey into fatherhood.

Considered Joseph's seminal work, "Word Becomes Flesh" has been touring the United States since 2003. He describes "Flesh" as "confronting the intersection of the physical reality and mythology about the black male body, from the cotton field to the athletic field and all the spaces in between." The former Broadway star of the Tony award-winning "The Tap Dance Kid" was honored in 2007 by Smithsonian Magazine as one of America's top young innovators in the arts and sciences. He spoke briefly before the performance to acknowledge the MACC's diverse season and its commitment to presenting new works.

The powers that be at the MACC have made some bold choices this season from Sheetal Gandhi's "Bahu-Beti-Biwi" to Ben Varen to February's Martha Graham Dance Company. If you didn't already know, tickets for most events at the MACC start at just \$12, so don't let price scare you away from the groundbreaking New York-quality performances happening this season at Castle Theater.

# The Washington Post

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## At Hip-Hop Theater Festival, 'Word Becomes Flesh' makes a strong point

By Rebecca Ritzel

July 17, 2011

In a theoretical theatrical smackdown, the average Capital Fringe Festival actor would likely lose to the average Hip-Hop Theater Festival performer — especially if the contest involved poetry, break dancing or push-ups.

"Word Becomes Flesh" features all three. And if you've seen a few too many whiny, wimpy one-man shows lately, here's your hair-of-the-dog cure. Originally a 2003 solo performance for Bay Area-based choreographer Marc Bamuthi Joseph, this weighty reworking of Joseph's knocked-up story is now performed by a powerful quintet of actor-dancers.

It's not a comedy, though many in Friday's Dance Place audience laughed at uneasy lines like: "[Blacks] are never on time. So when she told me she was late, I wasn't surprised." When the show turns serious, though, it's stark. And what makes it so good is that the transitions between poetic quips and social commentary flow so smoothly.

The performers take turns narrating the excruciating nine months that follow Joseph cheating on his girlfriend. He knows the resulting child will be not just a baby, but a statistic: another black child with an absentee dad. Often while one guy talks, another performs a lyrical hip-hop solo in the spotlight beside him. There's a monologue about having a girl and a krump-inspired number about childbirth classes. The ensemble pieces are more serious; in one, synchronized variations on the push-up follow a condemnation of the prison system.

Many choreographers attempt to tackle social issues; few interweave their own stories in a way that makes sense. "Word Becomes Flesh" isn't a groundbreaking dance work, but as a performance piece, it makes for a searing, satisfying evening.