IN THE LAB

CELL SURFACE

By Dominic Taylor

JANUARY 22, 2021
“When COVID happened, I was really interested if I placed these people in these boxes, like digital Petri dishes or something. In this examination, I want to lean into this technology to see what it can illuminate about this collision of Black people using digital tools I never considered.”

—Dominic Taylor

CELL SURFACE
by Dominic Taylor

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Hayley Finn

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Actors
ShaVunda Brown...............Dr. Roger Arliner Young
Godfrey L. Simmons Jr.* ......Dr. Ernest Everett Just

*Appearing through an Agreement between this theatre, the Playwrights’ Center, and Actors’ Equity Association, the Union of Professional Actors and Stage Managers in the United States.

UP NEXT
THIS MUCH I KNOW
by Jonathan Spector
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THE LOYALS
by Allison Gregory
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Visit PWCenter.org for information and tickets.
AN INTERVIEW WITH DOMINIC TAYLOR BY HAYLEY FINN

Hayley Finn: How did you get to learn about Ernest Just and Roger Young and what attracted you to their story?

Dominic Taylor: So this is a long story but I'll make it short. My sister went to Dartmouth years ago and I knew that Ernest Everett Just was the first black graduate from Dartmouth. I wrote a commission for Ensemble Studio Theatre's Sloan Fellowship. I wanted to write about Ernest Just because what I knew about him was that he was the first black graduate of Dartmouth and Dartmouth didn't want to hire him. He was treated poorly at his graduation. So I was gonna write about Ernest Just. I knew he wrote this textbook called, Biology of the Cell Surface which was really important for people who study biology. He was a smart dude. So I went in to do that.

Anyway, as I'm doing research for what I think is my play on Ernest Just, I discovered, starting in 1929, he did research at the Marine Biological Lab in Woods Hole, Massachusetts. And then I find—so strange! I find the grant applications or the residency application form for 1929. Every one was completed by Roger Young. And then I said, "Oh who's Roger Young? His graduate assistant?" I made a gendered assumption with the name Roger, so I thought it was a man. And then for some reason, I don't know what made me do it, I just went and googled Roger Young, and saw that it was a woman. I was like, "What? Wait a second. So for seven consecutive years, this woman was his graduate assistant helping him?" And then I started to research who she was. She's the first black woman to get a Ph.D. from U Penn in sciences.

I thought I was going to do a play about a black man who was unjustly treated by Dartmouth and by systems. I became fascinated by a black man who had some power who was unjustly treating a black woman. And then it became a series of things. There's this wonderful book called Black Apollo of Science about Ernest Just which is a great biography. But in it, I realized Roger Arliner Young had no website dedicated to her. You have to Google her. Ernest Just—there are Ernest Just societies. People know who he is. So on the world wide web, cause we're staying in the Zoom thing, they have a deeper foothold. So I'm winking at play too. We're getting a sense of the actors who are playing these characters that's inherent to Zoom?

Dominic Taylor: Right. So I don't know if I can pull this off. This is the great thing about this experiment. The reason why I was attracted to Zoom, I have these two characters who are looking at sea urchins. So I was like, "Can we look at these two characters and put them in a performance in some kind of biological experiment where I'm watching these characters dance around or move around and then see what happens when it all shakes out?" The Zoom version of this is my digital centrifuge; my digital petri dish.

I think it's interesting to think about them as these two bodies in this digital space, and then how we examine them.

Hayley Finn: So you've talked about the middle being the petri dish or the centrifuge and part three as being under the microscope. How do you see part one of the piece?

Dominic Taylor: So part one is when we're saying, "These are the two objects that we have. These are the two mixtures that we have. This is what oil is and this is what vinegar is. Or this is what peanut butter is and this is what chocolate is." or whatever; two different things. The thing I want to do in the first part is to have the audience say, "Okay, I have an understanding of who he is, so to speak. I have an understanding of who she is." And then in the second part, that's where they're experimenting. So the first section is really pulling out the elements and looking at what the elements are and making each of those people objects before we go into the center section. So we'll see if it works.

Hayley Finn: Throughout the piece, there's a meta-theatricality at play too. We're getting a sense of the actors who are playing the roles. And there's that tension that's existing, particularly around the woman who's playing Roger. Can you talk about that and how you imagined that existing?

Dominic Taylor: Yeah, that's me messing with theater; having fun with theater in some way. So we're in the artifice universe. We have these characters, but then there's this consciousness that these actors are performing roles. These actors are doing these things. But as we enter the world of the play, the context of these characters is different, so I wanted the actors to be aware of the context of the characters.

To clarify what I mean by the context, chances are most audience members don't know who Ernest Just is, however, they made a stamp of Ernest Just. To know Roger Arliner Young, you have to be somebody who really knows something. So what I am trying to do with the metatheatrical thing is to let the audience be aware that no, these two characters are not on an equal playing field. They might be on an equal playing field in the space that we're in or in the Zoom that we're in, but once you get into the world wide web they don't have an equal playing space.

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Dominic Taylor (playwright) is a writer-director and scholar of African-American theater whose work has been seen around the world. The Goodman Theatre, Steppenwolf Theatre, Ensemble Studio Theatre, and New York Theatre Workshop have all commissioned him. His play I Wish You Love premiered at Penumbra Theatre and was produced at both the Kennedy Center and Hartford Stage. His published plays include Hype Hero, Wedding Dance, Personal History, and Utopia Service(s). His essay "Don't Call African American Theatre Black Theatre: It's Like Calling a Dog a Cat" was published by the Massachusetts Review. Taylor is an alumus member of New Dramatists. He received his bachelor’s and master of fine arts degree from Brown University and is a member of Stage Directors and Choreographers Society and the Dramatists Guild. He is the Interim Chair of Theater at the UCLA School of Theater, Film and Television.

Sha Cage (director) is a film and theater producer, director, writer and actress. Named a Changemaker, Artist of the Year, a leading artist of her generation, and a Mover and Maker, Changemaker, Artist of the Year, a leading artist of her generation, and a Mover and Maker, he is the Interim Chair of Theater at the UCLA School of Theater, Film and Television.

ShaVunda Brown (Dr. Roger Arliner Young) is an internationally award-winning spoken word artist, an actress, organizer, and rap lyricist. She writes to empower and shed light on raw truths, with a sharp social consciousness. Using her knowledge of African diasporic spirituality, history, myths, and the southern folklore of her upbringing, she weaves stories and new visions of liberation. She has been seen in Art is Black Light, a MN Original Series featured on PBS TPT. She has originated a few roles in the world premiere of stage plays produced by The History Theater (MN), Children’s Theater (MN), and The Arena Stage Theater (DC). ShaVunda is the recipient of a 2020 Artist Grant from the Walker Arts Center, 2020/2019 Performance Arts Award from Washington County. She is a 2017–18 inaugural cohort member of the Bush Foundation’s Change Network, and a 2016–17 Many Voices Mentorship at the Playwrights’ Center.

AshaJaafaru (apprentice stage manager) is an actor, performer, writer, and creative idea-maker. She is involved in theater, film, and voiceover work in the Twin Cities and beyond. She creates art for liberation and continues to write imaginative stories.

Ben Lohrberg (design assistant) is a Minneapolis-based director, actor, and singer. His directing work includes MOTH at Bryant–Lake Bowl Theater, Cinderella: A World Premiere Musical at Hope Summer Repertory, work with the Chicago Ave Project, and his one-person clown play A Winter’s Hope. His performance work has been seen at the Guthrie Theater, Ten Thousand Birds, Park Square, Titan Theatre Company, Hope Summer Repertory, Interlochen Shakespeare Festival, and Feinstein’s/54 Below with his solo cabaret Dream With Me. Ben is a National YoungArts Winner and received his education from Interlochen Arts Academy and the UMN / Guthrie Theater BFA Actor Training Program. Benlohrberg.com

Godfrey L. Simmons, Jr.* (Dr. Ernest Everett Just) is the new Artistic Director of HartBeat Ensemble, Hartford’s Public Theater. He is also co-founder of Civic Ensemble, a community-based theatre company in Ithaca, NY. For Civic, he directed Eugene O’Neill’s All God’s Chillun Got Wings and The Next Storm, and appeared in My Children! My Africa!, Fast Blood, and his adaptation of Mike Daisey’s The Trump Card. Godfrey was Producing Artist in charge of New Artist Development for Off-Broadway’s Epic Theatre Ensemble, appearing in A More Perfect Union, Widowers’ Houses (which Godfrey co-adapted with Ron Russell), and Measure for Measure, among other plays. At Epic, he also co-wrote and starred in a documentary play about the election of President Barack Obama, Dispatches From (A)mended America. Additional New York theater credits include The Old Settler (Primary Stages), Betty’s Summer Vacation (Playwrights Horizons), Free Market (Working Theater), Leader of the People (New Georges), and microcrisis ( Ensemble Studio Theatre). Godfrey is a 2012 TCG/Fox Fellow, a participant in the TCG SPARK Leadership Program, and a lifetime member of Ensemble Studio Theatre.

Actors’ Equity Association (“Equity”), founded in 1913, is the U.S. labor union that represents more than 51,000 professional Actors and Stage Managers. Equity fosters the art of live theatre as an essential component of society and advances the careers of its members by negotiating wages, improving working conditions and providing a wide range of benefits, including health and pension plans. Actors’ Equity is a member of the AFL-CIO and is affiliated with FIA, an international organization of performing arts unions. #EquityWorks

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complete frame of who they were. You couldn't do that on stage. You couldn't have that happen. So I'm like, "That's kind of really cool." Cause I'm trying to play into the Zoom tool as much as I can to use the form to see what the form gleams us.

Dominic Taylor: Yeah. The biggest continuation in the story has to do with black men, black women, power relationships, the STEM world. There's a thing that happens which I think—and I don't want to reduce the play to this—but I think that one of the... Is there anything that you are particularly looking forward to in this process? That's it. That's the biggest piece.

Hayley Finn: I do know. That was my thesis. It was on women in the 19th-century diagnosed with hysteria, so I'm quite familiar with the term, yeah. [laughs]

Dominic Taylor: Right. Just was part of the faculty group that she's removed. And Hayley Finn had, she was her Ph.D. at U Penn and have a teaching career. But that thing happening is so horrible and ridiculous. The fact that black men perpetrated it. The faculty at Howard at the time—the science faculty—these included great men. Charles Drew created plasma. Percy Julian helped build steroids; these great, great men of science, right? And then they go and remove this woman because she's inconvenient or in the way. And it's such a... It's like if white guys did it, people would be like, "Oh, you know, that's white male privilege." Black guys do it, they try to find excuses for it. So I guess what I'm trying to do, to answer the question—"the continuing story"—is I'm trying to remove those excuses. I'm trying to have us examine that black community question about we deal into these worlds.

And I do think institutions help build those structures that we buy into which are detrimental. Like I was talking about—like single authorship or the notion that there's a limited number of positions available inside the academy. So if I have a position and a black woman has a position, we're taking up too much space. There's a point at which I acknowledge their privilege. I'm a full professor at a university. I gotta be aware that if a graduate student gives me a paper, I can publish the paper and tell her—since we'll stay with gender—and tell her that I'm just gonna take authorship. I'll look out for her on the next one. And there's nothing that the student can do really. There are some steps that they can take, but by and large, I still have power, which is fair. And so I think that the continued story is can this power be seen as the result of oppression—it's weird. One of the unusual things is, what do you do with that pain and why do you get it? Does it float on someone else? There's something that I don't put in the play that I probably should, now that I'm thinking about it. When the book got published in 1936, Roger Airliner Young was removed from her position at Howard. She was voted out by the faculty and world, removed. And the reason for her removal was that they claimed that she was a hysterical, which in the 1936 vocabulary was just a reason to get rid of a woman. You know what I'm saying?

Hayley Finn: AN INTERVIEW WITH DOMINIC TAYLOR (continued)

Dominic Taylor: For this workshop, one of the things I'm trying to figure out is are there other tools in Zoom that I'm not thinking about using? I'll give you an example, although I don't think I can do it. So when we go on Zoom calls every day—every day [laughs] all day—the two things that happen which aren't in the play, but I'm trying to figure out how to float into the play, are the participants' window and the chat. Those are part of our Zoom lives, right?

Hayley Finn: Necessary, yeah.

Dominic Taylor: And so I've been trying to figure out how do I float those things in? And it's about leaning into the technology in some way to try to find what are the particular things that make it what it is. And I do think that this is really—"for me"—this experiment is different than just trying to turn a Zoom play. I probably should let you know The Biology of the Surface is a much longer play that I wrote for Ensemble Studio Theatre. This play is half of it; less than half of it actually. What I'm trying to do is change the story and morphing it into being inside finding a frame for the tale. I'm trying to find a way to which this technology gives the experience form. I'm not trying to bring this into a land of television or trying to bring this into a film in any way. It's really about trying to find a way to make this a unique Zoom play. Now I know after the pandemic is over, nobody is going to be doing Zoom plays. But for this experiment, this is what I'm trying to pull off. And so, I don't know, it's like chat, participants, sharing screens, I'm just trying to figure out that stuff; the tools in Zoom that I could use to try to tell this story. That's it. That's the biggest piece.

Hayley Finn: That's great. Is there anything that we didn't touch on that you wanted to say?

Dominic Taylor: I've had people talk to me about this play and the Me Too movement and the Black Lives Matter movement and how those two things inform the play. Neither one of those movements, in particular, in trying to make this play, I mean, they're both part of our lives and so I think that they are in the play in some way. But they're not points that I was pointing towards. But I've had people read it and ask me about the mixture of Black Lives Matter and Me Too, and I guess Black Lives Matter and Me Too have been a part of my life from the
beginning because sexism and racism are together. Because I’m like, “Oh yeah, I get it.” The Me Too piece is just—the Black Lives Matter piece might be obvious—the Me Too piece is—how I was raised with a sister 15 months older and she and I’ve always been close.

My sister was the first girl to play little league baseball in Orange, New Jersey. She wasn’t a pioneer but she was this girl at the time that was always the first girl to do these boyish things. And then I would take dance classes with her and we would do whatever the other person was doing cause that’s how my mother raised us. But it was always, I always loved this—just a quick story about Me Too. So my sister and I played on this church basketball team together, a co-ed basketball team. This is a long time ago. And she was the only girl on the team and guys wouldn’t guard her. Guys wouldn’t guard her. And she was killing ‘em! She was getting 20 points a game. Somebody said to me, “You know your sister’s scoring more than you.” I’m like, “Nobody’s guarding her. This is great!” She’s open in the corner. I’m giving her the ball. It was fantastic! And so I think I have always been like, “You’re not gonna guard her, what are you crazy?” But it is a thing about, I don’t know, equality is always essential to everything, in so many ways. I mean, it’s just part of my life. That was all. That was the only thing I was going to say.

Hayley Finn: I’m really excited about this piece. It’s just been a pleasure having this conversation.

Dominic Taylor: Yeah, I’m looking forward to it. I think this will be fun. I’m hoping—you know when you build plays and you’re like, “Do they have a life afterward?” it would be fun to have a Zoom life afterwards. I know that people are probably gonna be sick of Zoom when we get done with the pandemic. But I just think this would just be fun. [laughs] I’m looking forward to this a lot.

Hayley Finn: One of the great things about Zoom that we’ve learned is that it’s easier to access material through Zoom. It gives people access to a lot of narratives that they wouldn’t have had otherwise. And so I could see that still happening post-pandemic, for sure.

Dominic Taylor: I talk about this a lot. After this pandemic, what are we taking with us when we go forward? Cause I think a lot of times people are like, “I just want to get on from this and ignore 2020.” And I’m like, “There’s stuff we can bring with us.” And if you can bring a play with you it’s good, you know, learning about a bunch of things. Like I say I’m really optimistic about this, so we’ll see what happens. And thanks for doing this, I’m glad the Playwrights’ Center is doing this. This will be fun.

Hayley Finn: Thank you.
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“Stories give us chances to see ourselves and what we could hope to be.”
—2020–21 Jerome Fellow, Candrice Jones

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As we continue to meet the challenges of these times, the Playwrights’ Center seeks to reimagine what is possible in theater; both in this moment and beyond. Throughout our 2020–21 Season we are intensifying our efforts, investing even more deeply in creative process, arts education, and access to opportunity. We are working to amplify unheard voices and promote equitable spaces, allowing for the greatest diversity of artists to make plays around the world. Through additional fellowships and increased public programming, we are creating new channels of support for thousands of writers—from paid opportunities that will sustain playwrights and theatermakers, to expanded educational resources that will enhance online learning tools and connect university students from around the world. We are inspiring a whole new generation of theater artists. It begins here.

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Inclusivity + Accessibility
We proactively engage and welcome people of all abilities, ages, cultures, ethnicities, genders, incomes, races, religions, and sexual orientations. We intentionally engage artists locally, nationally, and internationally, working across a multitude of processes and aesthetics.

Advocacy
We fight for a theater field in which playwrights and theatermakers not only survive but thrive. We are committed to modeling how institutions can authentically support the art of storytelling, and connect artists’ work to audiences around the globe.