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The Naturalistic, The Fantastic, and The In Between: Characteristics of the Theatrical Expression of Black Life

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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, SAN DIEGO

The Naturalistic, The Fantastic, and The In Between:
Characteristics of the Theatrical Expression of Black Life

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements

for the degree Master of Fine Arts

in

Theatre and Dance (Acting)

by

Zora Howard

Committee in charge:

Marc Barricelli, Chair
Eva Barnes
Charles Oates
Manuel Rotenberg

2017

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The Thesis of Zora Howard is approved and it is acceptable in quality and form for publication on microfilm and electronically:

Chair

University of California, San Diego

2017

DEDICATION

To Claude and Julie, my anchors,
and to Andrew, my angel.

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File 1. *Venus* Photo

File 2. *Venus* Photo

File 3. *Native Son* Photo

File 4. *Native Son* Photo

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

The Naturalistic, The Fantastic, and the In Between:
Navigating the Theatrical Expression of Black Life

by

Zora Howard

Master of Fine Arts in Theatre and Dance (Acting)

University of California, San Diego, 2017

Marc Barricelli, Chair

In his article, “Black Lives Matter Onstage”, theatre and cultural critic, Hilton Als, makes a poignant observation about the black women playwrights currently being produced both regionally and in New York. He writes, “...they invariably wrote in one of two ways: either their work was highly stylized and poetic...or it was naturalistic and conventionally structured.” Yes, from Ntozake to Nottage, from Hansberry to Hall, oftentimes, the scope of black expression onstage seems to exist at opposite ends of a fixed spectrum: there is the utterly fantastic magic of black life, and, then, there is the

naturalistic drudgery of black life. Als remarks on this phenomenon specifically in regards to dramatic literature, but it is one that must consequently affect all elements of theatrical expression, and, for the black actor, the means to actuation across these two separate and inseparable worlds is process; the definition, performance. What to make, then, in and of that In-Between space, which is most certainly absurd in that it must interrogate the elusive nature of the black experience that is so vehemently denied and feverishly obscured both onstage and otherwise?

At UCSD, I've had opportunity to straddle both poles. My onstage training more or less began with the role of the indomitable Mother Showman, matriarch of the freaks in Suzan Lori Parks' mythic historofiction, *Venus*. Last quarter, I played the woebegone Bessie Smith in Nambi Kelly's adaptation of *Native Son*, whose rape and subsequent murder is nearly folded into the inner-machinations of the play's larger scheme. Pressed between thee portrayals of these black women, the worlds of which were either limitless or extremely limited, it was my voice training that grounded me in truth. It is what Zora Neale Hurston describes in her 1934 essay "Characteristics of Negro Expression" as, "the impromptu ceremony always ready for every hour of life": extempore and, yet, intentional. Through voice, I was able to find the linking piece; the In- Between space, where when Bessie moaned and the Mother Showman wailed it was both carnal and supernatural at once.

It is the pursuit of the In-Between that has been my charge throughout this graduate experience and will continue to be my charge as I move forward. It is an imaginary space; one that does not yet fully exist and perhaps never will, where the black body moves freely and the black voice reverberates beyond and beyond.