

Eisa Davis

Voice with a Pedigree

Hip-hop wordplay and musicality ring out in her work

LAURA E. ROSE

BY LORI ANN LASTER

“My only trouble is not having more than 24 hours in the day,” laughs Eisa Davis. She’s just rushed in, breathless and bright-eyed, from a rewrite session devoted to her new play, *Six Minutes*, which was read at New York City’s LABYRINTH Theater Company in December. She’s wearing jeans, a sweater and a brown Triple Five Soul jacket, with her dark hair neatly pulled back. Settling in at Bittersweet coffee house in her stomping grounds of Fort Greene, Brooklyn, Davis sips peppermint tea and taps her foot to the jazz. Her soft voice grows passionate as she describes the artistic challenges of a busy life performing, writing, teaching and rehearsing—and that’s not counting her daily singing warm-up. The kinetic energy that surrounds this thirtysomething singer-songwriter-actor-playwright is palpable and contagious.

And this is actually a slow day. February is when things will truly get hectic. Her musical memoir *Angela’s Mixtape* premieres Feb. 15 at Synchronicity Performance Group in Atlanta (New Georges will produce the play in New York next season). At the same time, Davis will be making her Broadway debut as an actor in the acclaimed musical *Passing Strange*, reprising the role of Mother that she originated at Berkeley Repertory Theatre in 2006 and reprised at New York City’s Public Theater this past spring and summer.

This all builds on her recent successes, which include stagings of the young-audience extravaganza *Hip Hop Anansi*, mounted in 2006 at Maryland’s Imagination Stage; her com-

PELLING adaptation of Melba Pattillo Beals’s memoir *Warriors Don’t Cry*, about the integration of Little Rock Central High School, at Los Angeles’s Cornerstone Theater Company; and the Off-Broadway production of her 2007 Pulitzer finalist, *Bulrushes*, at Urban Stages. (“It’s not often that I am so transported that I forget my own body when I read a script,” marveled Pulitzer jury member Paula Vogel. “And it’s the ability of a writer to create those sensations that announces, unmistakably: Here is a Voice.”)

It’s a voice with something of a pedigree. Named Angela Eisa Davis after her aunt, controversial political activist Angela Davis, who ran twice for vice president on the Communist Party ticket, Davis was raised amid the social upheaval of the Bay Area in the 1970s. Her mother, a civil rights attorney, and her late grandmother, a teacher, immersed her in the arts at a young age—she started piano lessons at six, took dance and arts classes, sang in the church choir and would often put on plays for her family and neighbors. “I took the after-dinner hour a little too seriously,” Davis recalls.

When she was nine, Davis performed monologues about her Aunt Angela’s childhood in front of hundreds of people at a Communist Party event at Finn Hall in West Berkeley. “Even though those monologues were drawn directly from her autobiography, it was sort of this creation that I’d made and could share,” Davis remembers. “To not only have an audience of my family but a huge hall of people definitely



Tinashe Kajese, left, and Zabryna Guevara in Davis's *Bulrusher*, at New York City's Urban Stages.

made me catch the theatre bug.”

Davis's upbringing was unorthodox, even for a child born into such a culturally progressive environment. She often took part in demonstrations and protests, went on trips to places like socialist Grenada and lugged bags full of glass to the recycling center before it was cool to be green. She even jokes about taking a private tutorial in Marxism from her Aunt Angela before she flew east to begin her studies at Harvard.

Once there, Davis took classes with playwright Adrienne Kennedy, who would continue to be her mentor after graduation and encourage her to write about her unique childhood. Davis later enrolled at New York City's Actors Studio at the New School, and she got her first major role in the Signature Theatre Company's 1995 premiere of Kennedy's Obie-winning play *June and Jean in Concert*.

Meanwhile, the play that Kennedy prompted Davis to write in 2003, *Angela's Mixtape*, is coming into its own. A highly personal and poetic recounting of her early years (Eisa herself is featured as a character) and the ways in which she came to terms with the hefty legacy of her activist aunt and mother, the play was originally presented as a staged reading at New York Theatre Workshop as part of the Hip-Hop Theater Festival.

“If you have this kind of legacy, how do you live your life?” asks Davis, as we sip our tea. “What parts of it do you leave behind? And how do you find your own independent identity?” *Angela's Mixtape* employs the aesthetics of hip-hop to illuminate the world in which Davis grew up. “The form literally is

the content,” she suggests. “When you make a mixtape for your friend, family or loved one, it's about sharing memories or making new ones together. Each of the sections, each of the songs, are memories, stories being shared—with Angela, with family and with the audience.”

With the Eisa character serving as emcee, the play rhythmically jumps between Davis's childhood home, her junior high school, Aunt Angela's kitchen and even her jail cell, where she was held on weapons charges in the early '70s when Eisa was just a baby (she was ultimately acquitted). Scenes of Eisa and Angela dealing with similar childhood strife are juxtaposed. Blistering with frustration, the character Eisa charges, “Angela almost went to the gas chamber for standing up for her views. All I want is a boyfriend and some cool clothes.” Yearning to fit in with friends, say the right things and listen to the right music, the character of Eisa endures an internal tug of war as she tries to interpret her own life through the lens of the accomplishments of her prominent aunt, who now teaches at the University of California—Santa Cruz.

“The activists of her time fought all their struggles so our generation would have a better planet to live on. Right?” the playwright muses. “But I think something gets lost—when you don't have to put up that same struggle for your daily existence, you can forget the price paid for all the wonderful creature comforts that you have.” ▶

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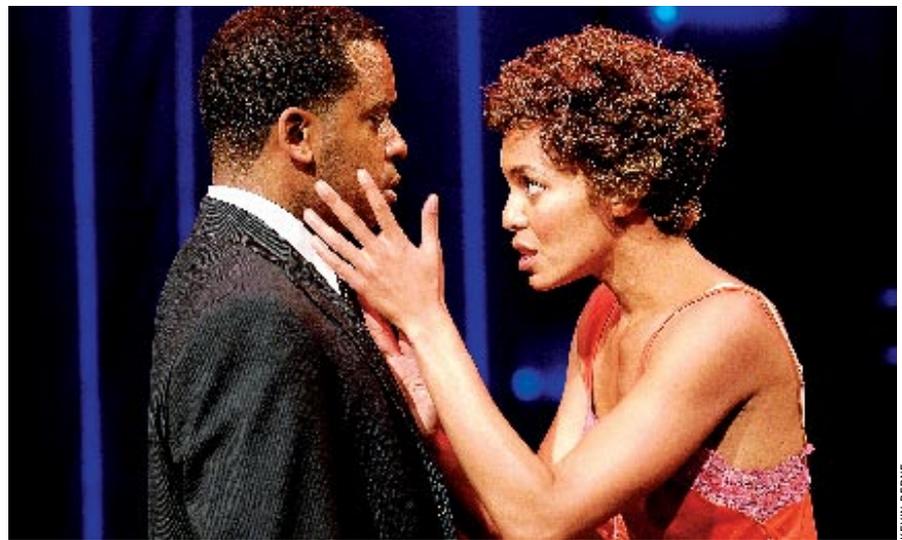


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Synchronicity producing artistic director Rachel May echoes that sentiment. “We all struggle to define ourselves in concert with and in opposition to the expectations of our families,” says May, as she works with production director Liesl Tommy to bring Davis’s theatrical meditation on memory to life. Breaking the boundaries of traditional dramatic structure, Davis experiments with time and space to mimic the precariousness of memory and how it forms an individual’s identity.

WHILE DAVIS’S COMING-OF-AGE story is playing to Atlanta audiences, she’ll be dramatizing another artist’s trying adolescence. *Passing Strange*, by singer-songwriter Stew, is an energetic mix of rock concert and musical that tells the story of Youth, a younger incarnation of the author on a wayward journey of self-discovery.

At the start of rehearsals, Davis says she had difficulty digesting the solemnity of the Mother character, who takes virtually no part in the rocking-bouncing-singing-dancing celebration for which the play has been so embraced. “Both as an actor and as a character, it’s a very painful experience,”



Daniel Breaker with Davis in *Passing Strange*, at Berkeley Repertory Theatre in California.

she allows, “and of course one of the most wonderful things I have been a part of.”

Stew and director Annie Dorsen found Mother a tricky part to cast. “I was hell-bent on avoiding the tried, guilt-reveling image of the authoritative, pseudo-authentic, grounded black earth mother dishing out words of wisdom like pancakes,” says Stew.

“What Elsa does,” chimes in Public Theater artistic director Oskar Eustis, “is cut through a lot of stereotypes about African-American mothers.”

A key factor in the casting was also Davis’s singing ability. With her extensive experience as a vocalist and pianist—including many engagements at Joe’s Pub and her

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Bahni Turpin in Davis's *Warriors Don't Cry* at Cornerstone Theater Company, Los Angeles.

recently released CD *Something Else*—she naturally rose to the occasion.

“All of my plays are linked by my love of sound and rhythm, rhyme, internal rhyme, alliteration and wordplay,” says Davis. While her songs are pure emotion, the playwriting is more rational—or as she terms it, “a slower burn.”

Musicality certainly informed her process in writing *Bulrusher*, which evolved from song lyrics she wrote for a composer friend, Daniel T. Denver. *Bulrusher* is set in the small town of Boonville in Mendocino, Calif., at the beginning of the Civil Rights Movement. Bulrusher, a tomboyish girl on the cusp of womanhood, was abandoned in a basket in the river as an infant and doesn't know from whom she inherited her dark eyes and skin (the rest of the town is white). The filial bond she feels for the river gives her the magical ability to “read water,” or see into other people's futures. Bulrusher's life is turned upside down when she meets Vera, fresh off the bus from Birmingham, Ala., a town torn asunder by racial strife. Vera is flabbergasted that race has little meaning in a town which values being a local over everything else, and she opens Bulrusher's eyes to the world outside provincial Boonville.

Davis's love of language plays to particular effect in *Bulrusher*. Boonville natives “harp the ling,” Bulrusher explains to Vera, “to make everything they talk about they own.” While vacationing in the Mendocino Valley, Davis ran across a book about Boontling, Boonville's historical homespun language, and was instantly taken with it. This colorful and often humorous lingo (with terms like “can

kicky” to mean angry and “heel scratchin” for sex) fell out of fashion and now only lives in the memories of some of the old-timers who still populate the small town. “The idea that languages die is a little disheartening to me,” says Davis. “So *Bulrusher*—and pretty much all of my work, in some way—is trying to celebrate those languages that are disappearing.”

Davis's fascination with language, says Urban Stages artistic director Frances Hill, “gives her the ability to evoke such vivid characters and wonderfully imaginative worlds.” The usage of Boontling also emphasizes Boonville's insularity and helps drive home some of Davis's larger questions about race and its constructs within cultures. In Boonville, it's the way that you talk that indicates whether you're an outsider, not the color of your skin.

In her new play *Six Minutes*, language

plays a different role—two contemporary literary critics aggressively analyze and deconstruct their chaotic world with a blend of hip-hop vernacular and stiff academic jargon, ultimately challenging the precepts of “hip-hop culture” and the generation that spawned it. Davis recalls her attraction to the hip-hop movement growing up: “I really saw it as this unbelievable platform for these two things that I loved—music and politics.”

Her ability to interweave all of her passions—language and performing, in addition to music and politics—singles Davis out as a one-of-a-kind artist. And who knows—once she gets through February, she might just find that elusive 25th hour in the day. ☑

Lori Ann Laster is a 2007–08 American Theatre Affiliated Writer, supported by a grant from the Jerome Foundation.

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