WORDS on PLAYS
INSIGHT INTO THE PLAY, THE PLAYWRIGHT, AND THE PRODUCTION

Let There Be Love

by Kwame Kwei-Arma
Directed by Maria Mileaf

The Geary Theater
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*This piece refers to significant elements of the plot, including the end of the play.


Overview of

Let There Be Love

The world premiere of Let There Be Love was produced in 2008 by the Tricycle Theatre Company in London and directed by Kwame Kwei-Armah. The play’s American premiere, directed by Jeremy B. Cohen and starring Avery Brooks, was produced in 2010 by Center Stage in Baltimore, where Kwei-Armah is artistic director. A.C.T.’s production is the West Coast premiere of Let There Be Love.

Creative Team

Scenic Designer ............................................. Daniel Ostling
Costume Designer ......................................... Lydia Tanji
Lighting Designer ......................................... Russell H. Champa
Sound Designer .......................................... Bart Fasbender

Characters and Cast

Alfred ............................................................. Carl Lumbly
Gemma .......................................................... Donnetta Lavinia Grays
Maria ............................................................. Greta Wohlrabe

Setting

The London living room of Alfred Morris.

Synopsis

Act I

Gemma, a 30-year-old West Indian–British woman, has just brought her elderly father, Alfred, home from the hospital; he will not reveal the reason for his hospitalization. Alfred spends much of his time alone. His wife walked out on him many years ago, leaving him to raise their two daughters by himself, but he has a strained relationship with both of them and won’t even talk to Gemma’s older sister. It has become obvious to
Gemma that Alfred needs assistance in his old age, but because he has pushed away his family, she has employed someone from an agency to aid him around the house. Alfred protests that he doesn’t need this and resorts to name-calling. Gemma leaves, frustrated.

The next day, the home assistant, a recent Polish immigrant named Maria, lets herself into Alfred’s living room, startling him. She has trouble communicating with him because of language barriers, but when he realizes who she is, he becomes angry, tells her that her services are not required, and makes disparaging remarks about her Polish heritage. Maria, having been forewarned about Alfred’s disposition, is undeterred by his behavior. He softens when she takes an interest in his life and his beautiful radiogram, which he eagerly demonstrates by playing the songs of his favorite musician, Nat King Cole. Maria enthusiastically enjoys the music, but she suddenly realizes she is due at her next job. She asks Alfred whether he wants her to come back, and he reluctantly gives her some of his prescriptions to fill.

A few weeks later, Gemma brings Alfred his mail, which he opens. Upon reading one of the letters, he is visibly shocked. When Gemma asks what is wrong, Alfred brushes her off. Gemma confesses to her father that she has fallen on hard times after a breakup and asks Alfred if he would let her move into his house; he could move into an apartment of a more manageable size. He refuses her offer.

Maria arrives moments after Gemma leaves. Seeing that Alfred is distraught, Maria cheerfully suggests that they go to Ikea for some retail therapy, but Alfred pushes her away. Hurt, she gathers her things and leaves. Alfred, alone and ashamed, rereads the letter and
then goes to his medicine cabinet. He throws away all of his pills—except the painkillers. He studies them and a copy of Derek Humphry’s *Final Exit*. He then picks up the phone, calls Maria, and tells her to come back.

Later that evening, Maria and Alfred are in high spirits after a trip to Ikea, until Alfred notices a mark on Maria’s face. He correctly guesses that her boyfriend gave her the bruise. Maria confesses that her boyfriend has been cheating on her with their landlady. When she confronted him about it, he hit her. She has been looking for somewhere else to stay, but she can’t afford to pay rent by herself. Alfred is moved by Maria’s plight and tells her that she can live with him until she finds her own place. Maria is taken aback by his generosity, and Alfred insinuates that there might be something she could help him with in the future.

**Act II**

Two months have passed, and Maria’s life has improved significantly since moving in with Alfred. Their relationship has grown friendly and comfortable, even as he has become more frail. He still refuses to take his painkillers. She asks him directly what his illness is, and he continues to evade the question. One night, Maria is persistent. Alfred finally reveals that he has terminal cancer and only one month left to live; no one else knows. Maria is shocked and upset, but Alfred explains that he doesn’t want to die a long and slow death. Just as the doorbell rings, Alfred asks if she would help him end his life. Instead of responding, Maria answers the door; it’s Gemma, who is surprised to see
Maria at the house after working hours. Alfred defensively explains that Maria moved in to escape her abusive boyfriend. Seeing that a conflict is escalating, Maria excuses herself.

Gemma is extremely hurt that Alfred allowed Maria to move in but refused his own daughter in her time of need. Alfred insists that their situations are different; Maria was a victim, whereas Gemma isn’t innocent. He reveals that he knows Gemma cheated on her ex-husband with other women. He tells her he doesn’t care that she’s gay; he cares that she kept it from him. He is disappointed in her lack of gratitude and trust, and announces that she won’t get anything from him after he dies. Gemma, stunned by the verbal onslaught, gathers herself and leaves. Unseen by them, Maria watches the entire argument.

A few days later, Maria has reluctantly agreed to help Alfred go through with his plan, but she suggests that Alfred take her to his tropical homeland of Grenada before he dies. He agrees to the plan, excited about the prospect of telling her all of his stories in the land where he grew up.

Late one night, after Alfred has fallen asleep, Maria tells Gemma about Alfred’s illness and prognosis. She earnestly outlines her plan to take Alfred to Grenada (leaving out his decision to take his own life) but suggests that Gemma join him instead so that she won’t have any regrets after her father dies. Gemma is hesitant. Accompanying Alfred would mean forgiving him, and she is not ready to do that.

It is time for the trip to Grenada. Alfred, looking even weaker than before, sits with his bags packed. While he and Maria wait for the cab to pick them up and take them to the airport, they listen to music and sing along. Gemma enters and announces that the cab has arrived. Maria quickly explains that Gemma will be the one accompanying Alfred to Grenada. This news upsets him, but Alfred finally agrees to join his daughter on the trip.

Days later, Maria is alone in Alfred’s living room studying for her UK citizenship exam when the doorbell rings. She answers it, and Gemma and Alfred enter; the relationship between them has significantly improved. Gemma suddenly receives a call—she has reconciled with her partner, and with Alfred’s permission, she leaves to meet her. Alfred tells Maria about his wonderful trip, during which he reconnected with his ex-wife and received her forgiveness for his poor treatment of her while they were married. He is extremely grateful that he didn’t kill himself before going on the trip, but he knows that he will never again be as happy as he is now. He tells Maria that he is ready.

Alfred joyfully retrieves his box of painkillers but is furious to find that the pills are missing. Panicked, Maria admits that she threw them out after she spoke to Alfred on the phone while he was in Grenada; because he was obviously happy, she didn’t think he would go through with killing himself. Alfred demands to know why Maria would destroy the best moment of his life.

Finally, she retrieves the pills from a hidden corner of the room and returns them to Alfred, who calms down. He begins to make the preparations and, undeterred by Maria’s distress, tells her to play Nat King Cole’s “Let There Be Love” on his radiogram. He drinks his concoction of painkillers and holds his arms out to dance with Maria. They dance around the room before Maria helps Alfred into his chair. He smiles and closes his eyes as Cole’s voice lulls him to sleep.
How We Listen

An Interview with Playwright Kwame Kwei-Armah

By Michael Paller

If Kwame Kwei-Armah’s career doesn’t defy description, it certainly strains the hyphen. He is a playwright-director-actor–BBC program presenter–artistic director–university chancellor. Kwei-Armah was raised in the Southall area of London by immigrant parents from Grenada; his mother ran a nursery and worked as a nurse and hairdresser so that her children could attend private schools. Kwei-Armah’s life was changed at the age of 11 when he saw the television series Roots. “By the end of the series,” he later said, “I told my mother that I would one day trace my heritage back to Africa and reclaim an ancestral name.” He did; eight years later, he traced his family lineage back through the slave trade to Ghana and changed his name from Ian Roberts (which, he learned, was the name of a Scotsman who had owned some of his ancestors) to Kwame Kwei-Armah.

He got his first job as an actor at the age of 16. After appearing in several West End plays, he became known to a wider public as the paramedic Finlay Newton on the popular BBC series Casualty from 1999 until his character was killed off in 2004. While on the show, he earned a master’s degree in screenwriting at London University of the Arts, where he became chancellor in 2011. His many other BBC appearances include working as a presenter on The Culture Show and Newsnight Review, and as a panelist on Question Time, a show in which political and media figures answer questions from the public.

His first play, Bitter Herb (1998), was produced at the Bristol Old Vic and won the prestigious Peggy Ramsay Award; he subsequently became the theater’s resident playwright from 1999 to 2001. His fifth play, Elmina’s Kitchen, was produced at the National Theatre in 2003 and became the first play by a black British playwright to appear in the West End. The play was shortlisted in the Best New Play category of the Olivier Awards, and Kwei-Armah won the Evening Standard Award for Most Promising New Playwright. The 2005 television adaptation won a BAFTA Award. The two subsequent parts of his “political triptych,” Fix Up and Statement of Regret, were also produced at the National Theatre, where he initiated the Black Plays Archive, which documents the first professional production of every play by black British, African, and Caribbean writers in the United Kingdom.

In 2007 he made his directorial debut at Center Stage in Baltimore (with Naomi Wallace’s Things of Dry Hours), where he was already an established playwright; the
theater produced *Elmina’s Kitchen* in 2005, directed by Gregg T. Daniels, and would later produce *Let There Be Love* in 2010, directed by Jeremy B. Cohen. In 2011 Kwei-Armah was appointed artistic director of Center Stage. He also earned the distinction of being named an officer of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire in 2012. He is currently writing *Marley*, a musical based on the life and music of Bob Marley, which will have its world premiere at Center Stage in May 2015. A.C.T. talked with Kwei-Armah about the inspiration behind *Let There Be Love*, his work as a playwright and an artistic director, and the challenges and rewards of returning to a script almost a decade after writing it.

I heard that part of the impetus for *Let There Be Love* was an art exhibition called *The West Indian Front Room: Memories and Impressions of Black British Homes* at the Geffrye Museum of the Home in 2005–06 in London, which recreated the front rooms [living rooms] of black Caribbean immigrants to Britain in the 1960s and ’70s. Could you talk about your experience there and how it affected you?

The show was curated by a writer and artist named Michael McMillan. I walked in and immediately felt as if I’d walked into my personal front room and those of many of my aunties and uncles of my youth. It struck me so viscerally, so profoundly, that I at once understood the power of recreating art that is fashioned by one’s influences. And then I realized that many of my plays, certainly the early plays, came from the politics of my family’s front room; that led me to wanting to write something that grew out of that front room. And then this story emerged.

Was it a fairly immediate response or did it happen over time?

I have a feeling it was within weeks.

I also read that another seed of the play came from walking down the street in Southall [a neighborhood in West London that has been home to various immigrant communities over the years] and hearing Asian men talk about the way foreigners were taking jobs away from them; you later heard West Indians saying the same thing.

Abso-bloody-lutely. I can still see the seats that they sat on, talking about “these bloody foreigners stealing jobs from our children.” I was so stunned by it. I thought, “Oh my God, how short is our memory? How short is memory?” How easy it is to forget! It was only a few years ago that we were being spoken about in that way. I found that ironic and fascinating and disturbing. And I think that these two things [seeing the exhibition and overhearing the immigrants on the street] happened within a couple weeks of each other. Then I started to write the play.

It was serendipitous that these things came together to help create your play.

Absolutely.
Many London neighborhoods are divided along observable racial lines. Does the city’s racial geography play into your work in any way?

Here’s the wonderful thing for me about being born in Southall: the neighborhood suffered from white flight before I knew what that term meant. Although the geography of race and class is not as pointed in England as it is in America, it’s still very evident. So geography does play a little bit into my work. But because I’ve lived in West London and Southall and North London and Tottenham and Hackney and East London, then went back to North London, I tend to be less geographically territorial. The black parts and the middle-class parts of London tend to arrive in my plays from sideways rather than through the center.

*Let There Be Love* was first produced in 2008. For the current production, you decided to revisit certain aspects of the play, including the relationship between Alfred and his daughter Gemma. Why was that? What did you learn about the play in the process?

I directed the play twice in Britain and have seen three other productions, one in the United States and two in Italy. In nearly every production, it’s not that the actresses who played Gemma weren’t great, but they were uncomfortable. So when [A.C.T. Artistic Director] Carey [Perloff] and [director] Maria [Mileaf] said they were having problems working her out, I thought, “You know what? I think you guys speak truth. This is a good opportunity to jump in and reexamine.” She was written to encapsulate a metaphor, and I worried that I hadn’t made her as three-dimensional as the other two characters. I discovered that Gemma just fell off at the end of the play, and there was some part of her that I hadn’t quite examined. So, for this production, we took the time to examine Gemma again.

This play is going on eight years old and you’ve moved on; you’re in a different place in your life. You could have said, “Well, the play’s the play, take it or leave it.” But instead, you jumped back in. It says a lot about you as a playwright.
Thank you for that compliment. Do I believe that a play never stops being developed? Well, yes—but sometimes, no. Had somebody said that about another play of mine, I may have said, “Actually I think it’s fine. You can do it or not.” But Carey and Maria touched on something that I had been secretly worrying about, so I wanted to jump in. When there’s a big gaping hole in your work, when it’s pointed out to you, you want to jump in.

Are you satisfied with it now?

Oh, who knows? I’ll see it made manifest in the production; the actress will get inside of the role and tell me if she’s satisfied. If she’s satisfied, I’ll feel a little bit better, and then I’ll take it from there.

In the text, you describe Gemma as “the classic last child of the pioneer generation.” What does that mean?

The first couple children of people from the pioneer generation tend to have a real connection to “home”—to whatever Caribbean island they’ve come from. When they were born, their parents were bristling with the culture and the morals of their home. Inadvertently, the last child makes the parents slightly more exhausted than the first one did, so sometimes less information about home, and less of the energy from their parents’ youth, is given to them. Sometimes this can lead to a real separation, a real lack of kinship and connection between parent and child.

I connected very much with my mother and father because I felt that I was almost at home [in Grenada] with them. Of course, there’s lots of research that shows that it’s not the immigrants, but the children of immigrants who suffer psychologically in far greater numbers because they are stuck between what is and isn’t home. I often call that child the “transition child”—the child who is as English as English can be but has felt rejected by England. They don’t have the vigorous remembrance of everything that is West Indian and “home.” So I think Gemma carries the angst of not being able to communicate with her parents in the way that her sister could.

Many of your plays are about displacement or families in transition. Personal, cultural, and social history seem to be significant to you.

I’m a little addicted to the notion that history is the present and also heavily influences the future. I’ve come from a community whose history has been hidden from them for a very long time, and to some degree, it is the lack of history that has been allowed to get a purchase on our culture and self-esteem. Using art as a way to explore one’s history, both personal and communal, to investigate notions of inferiority that have been placed in our minds by a dominant culture, to examine their lies and effects, has always been something I’ve found myself very interested in.
I read that when you were 19, you discovered that your family came from Ghana, and you then changed your name from Ian Roberts to Kwame Kwei-Armah. What’s the significance of the name you chose for yourself?

It’s very difficult to explain. I was relatively young, and the act of renaming myself was probably the biggest thing I’ll ever do in my life. Its significance was that I no longer carried the name of a person who once owned someone in my family. To rid myself of that label—I found that to be terribly important. It was also something to hand to my children. My mother and father made a four-thousand-mile journey in order to give me the benefits of the first world, and I felt I could make a similar journey, only intellectually, to give my children the benefit of my inheritance—by linking them back to their ancestry by name.

So history becomes part of the future.
Correct.

Why did you choose to use songs by Nat King Cole in the play?

The wonderful thing about music from the Eastern Caribbean [where Grenada is located] is that the influences are calypso, of course, and soca [a blend of soul and calypso] when it developed, but also American music. I grew up listening to reggae, calypso, Nat King Cole, American soul, and country western. Oddly, I don’t even know why Nat jumped into it, but I think that the title, *Let There Be Love*, came to me when I thought about Alfred. What does he most want in his life? He wants love. And what does Gemma most want? She wants love. That’s the binding agent. As I was writing the speech about Nat King Cole, where Alfred says, “Nat has the answer to everything,” I thought of one of my uncles who would often play Nat King Cole or the other great crooner of that time, Billy Eckstine. I was a bit like, “Wow, yeah, that’s so interesting!” So I thought, rather than do the stereotypical thing of quoting calypso, Nat felt rather apt. He felt right. That’s why I went there.

What these particular songs exude, and what is otherwise missing from Alfred’s life, is joy. There’s so much joy in this music.

Absolutely. So much joy. *So* much joy. You listen to it and [singing], “Let’s face the music and dance,” and it’s a jumping rhythm that just moves you.

I take it that music plays a large role in your life.

A huge part of my life. I can think of very few things that create balance in me the way that music does. And I imagine it’s that way for most people.
Unlike many of your other plays, this one doesn’t seem to have explicit political content. Or does it?

I think it does, in that one of your first questions was about my remembering hearing the Asian guys and the West Indians talking about immigration. In a way, that’s right at the core of this play. When I wrote the play, the question of immigration, about the Eastern Europeans coming in, was a huge debate in England. I was looking at the way existing immigrant communities accept a new immigrant community. It’s also political in that Alfred is essentially saying to Gemma, “My generation is soon to die and you, the young Caribbean—have you earned your place to be our inheritors?” So I think the play is relatively, even explicitly, political.

We haven’t mentioned Maria yet. Some people might be surprised to know that Maria contains aspects of your mother.

My mother died two years before I wrote the play, and in a way, that’s part of why I became a director. Let There Be Love was the first or second thing I ever directed. I didn’t want to give it up to anybody else because I wanted to continue the dance with my mother. And Maria is very much the quintessential smart immigrant who can sometimes play fool to catch wise, as the saying goes. She negotiates the world in front of her with ambition but also a kind of sorrow about having left home. She very much has the heart of my mother.

You were an actor, and then you became a writer, and then a director. Has being an actor informed your writing or your directing in any way?

Tremendously. Certainly, as a writer, there’s a need to create characters that can live and breathe and jump off the page and have depth. I was an actor for most of my working life, and that was important in learning how much space a writer must give the actor to live [inside a role]. But that can sometimes be my downfall, because I write knowing that an actor can go on the inside and fill out. So, sometimes, I don’t actually write the subtext, which can be a problem for me and for people reading my plays. As a director, I absolutely love actors, and being one allows me to get on the inside and treat the actor the way I would like to be treated.

Do you have any desire to act again?

I never say never about anything. I have always loved acting for television, particularly when you can go in and play for a couple weeks and then go back out and do some writing or directing.

Tell me a little bit about Marley, the new musical you’re directing and writing the book for. We [Kwei-Armah and Center Stage] are doing a world-premiere musical using the music of Bob Marley, setting it in the years when he was in exile in London—it will
run up to the assassination attempt in 1976 and his exile after that. We’re just getting ready to go into rehearsal a few days after *Let There Be Love* starts rehearsals at A.C.T.

You could have chosen to do an account of his whole life, as some people do when they write biographical plays, but you’ve chosen to concentrate on just a specific part of his life. Why?

I wanted to look at the hero in him. I wanted to find the kernel of his life that would amplify his biography without my having to take his whole life into account.

In 2011 you were named artistic director of Center Stage in Baltimore. How did that come about?

They had produced two of my plays, *Elmina’s Kitchen* [in 2005] and *Let There Be Love* [in 2010], and I had directed a Naomi Wallace play there called *Things of Dry Hours* [in 2007], so I had a relationship with Center Stage. I became an associate artist, so I would come back often. And when [then–Artistic Director] Irene Lewis was leaving, they asked me if I would throw my hat in the ring. At first I thought, “What do I want to go to Baltimore for? Why do I want to do that?” Then I started thinking about my life at the time and found that I was ready to investigate what it would be like to walk in the shoes of an artistic director. I was moaning a lot about choices that artistic directors were making; moaning is a British pastime. But I thought, “Why moan? Become a gatekeeper and see if you can do it any better.” And then Center Stage came up, and so did another job called The World Festival of Black Arts and Culture [of which Kwei-Armah was the 2010–11 artistic director], so I said, “Okay, this is what I’m supposed to be doing right now.” It was a really big leap from never having run a regional theater before to jumping in and being an artistic director.

Since you’re a playwright, a director, a BBC presenter, and chancellor of the University of the Arts in London, why run a theater on top of everything else, and on the other side of the ocean, at that?

It’s a very wise question! For me, life is about learning. This is a journey that just appeared before me, and I felt that it would be a wonderful learning curve, that I would learn things that I had no notion of. It was an adventure. When one looks at my life, I tend to add new things or investigate new pathways, probably every five years or so. I wake up at some point and decide that I’m going to investigate *this*—not that I’m trying to stop doing anything else, of course. I went back to school even though, at the time, I was a successful television actor. While on the TV show *Casualty*, I was doing my master’s [in screenwriting at the London College of Communication, a school in the University of the Arts] because I needed to learn something new. I adore learning; I am the typical clichéd lifelong learner.
Has all your work in British theater given you a perspective on American theater that Americans might not have?

I don’t think so. There are differences, no two ways about it. And one would think that those differences would have given me a bit of a head start, but they haven’t. I had to learn all over again what it is that my audience—and audiences in general—respond to. And it’s very different, in many respects, even though Broadway is filled with British imports. At the same time, taste varies depending on where you are in the United States. The taste is just not always the same, and a regional audience’s certainly isn’t.

And from community to community, it’s going to differ.

Absolutely, it’s going to differ. I landed here with a few plays up my sleeve that I wanted to do, and I still haven’t done them. I’m just learning and adapting as I go.

Could you point to one or two things you’ve learned about being an artistic director?

That it’s not easy [laughs]. That would be number one. Number two, and more importantly, I thought that being an artistic director was a dream job, that it was about putting your art onstage. I’ve learned that you have less power as an artistic director than you did before, because you’re balancing so many other things when creating a season. Also, your audience is not just your judge—the audience is the driver. Being an artistic director is about how we listen, how we gently lead, how we gently step back, how we hear what our audience wants and give them that, and then give them something a little bit more, trying to push their taste just a little bit further. The whole dance of being an artistic director is not about power, but about service.
The Plays of Kwame Kwei-Armah

*A Bitter Herb* (1998)
This play about a middle-class black businesswoman coming to grips with the murder of her son at the hands of racists was inspired by Kwei-Armah’s experience of witnessing a riot as a child growing up in London’s Southall district.

*Big Nose* (1999)
This calypso-fueled comedic musical sets French dramatist Edmond Rostand’s *Cyrano de Bergerac* in both London and the Caribbean during the 1950s.

*Blues Brother Soul Sister* (1999)
Kwei-Armah’s homage to soul music tells the story of a musician who wants to hold a tribute concert to ’60s soul, even though his female manager and his three female singers are more interested in going commercial.

Themes of family, crime, and the immigrant journey toward a better life prevail in this critically acclaimed drama. Set in London’s Hackney neighborhood, the play is centered on Deli, the owner of a West Indian restaurant, and his attempts to save his son, Ashley, from the area’s violent gang culture.

Kwei-Armah’s protagonist, Brother Kiyi, is a staunch activist who runs a failing black-history bookstore. Set against the inexorable march of progress in contemporary London, the play explores the unexpected ways in which our race and roots define us.

*Statement of Regret* (2007)
Part of Kwei-Armah’s “political triptych” of plays (which includes *Elmina’s Kitchen* and *Fix Up*), *Statement of Regret* is set in a political think tank and asks controversial questions about the need for racial solidarity.

*Seize the Day* (2009)
A political drama that features an idealistic young politician in the running to be London’s first black mayor, *Seize the Day* is a stark examination of power, race, and the challenge of weighing personal values against the game of politics.

*Beneatha’s Place* (2013)
Kwei-Armah’s first drama set in America is a response to Lorraine Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959) and Bruce Norris’s *Clybourne Park* (2010; produced at A.C.T. in 2011 and also based on Hansberry’s play). Following two of *Raisin*’s characters, the play offers an incisive look at identity politics, academia, and what it means to find home in a global community.
The Little Gifts of Otherness
An Interview with Director Maria Mileaf

By Allie Moss

Director Maria Mileaf is no stranger to challenging, captivating works of theater. Her recent work includes Detroit (2014), reasons to be pretty (2012), and Ruined (2011) at Philadelphia Theatre Company; The Rainmaker at The Old Globe (2013); and F2M at New York Stage and Film (2011). She is perhaps best known for her direction of the national premiere of Indian playwright Vijay Tendulkar’s controversial Sakharam Binder at The Play Company (2004). She also won the Barrymore Award for Outstanding Direction from the Theatre Alliance of Greater Philadelphia for her direction of The Story at Philadelphia Theatre Company in 2006. “I love directing plays that are character-driven. In general, I tend to work on new plays that have compelling writing,” she says. “Plus, I always want to make theater that I’d like to go see.”

Her affinity for plays with strong characters led her to Kwame Kwei-Armah’s Let There Be Love. She predicts that a character-driven work like this one will create a unique relationship between the actors and the audience. “It’s a three-character play; they all have very different perspectives on the world, but they’re all dealing with the same events—maybe the person next to you is going to see the story through the point of view of a different character from the one you are most drawn to. That’s going to make for an interesting conversation after the show.”

Mileaf is also reputed to be an “actor’s director” who works collaboratively with her cast to enable them to take creative risks and make dynamic choices. She gravitates toward work that allows her to problem-solve in unconventional ways. Her philosophy is straightforward but powerful: “Do the difficult thing and see what happens.”

In a recent conversation, Mileaf discussed her directorial approach, as well as the process of creating the world of Let There Be Love.

You’re known for excavating deeper meanings from a script, and plenty of playwrights have referred to you as a skilled play interpreter. What elements are integral to interpreting a script skillfully?

Finding truth is really important. That can come in a lot of different forms, styles, and possibilities. But at the end of the day, you have to believe there’s honesty in the
story that you’re telling. When you’re making theater, you have this great possibility of revealing small truths and then letting them run free. Those things add up, whether you’re creating characters with an actor, devising space with a designer, or building a soundscape—it has to have some kind of connection to the audience, because you’re telling a live story in front of real people, and that one-time event needs to be compelling. I’ve always been interested in that communion between audience and stage. The way to find that communion is to find the honesty in the play.

You’ve said, “I’m much more interested in invisible work,” and that you don’t see yourself as an auteur director. What’s your general approach and point of view when it comes to directing?

You have to start with the text that’s in front of you. You have a responsibility as an interpreter of work to be aware of the world that surrounds you—of the music that’s playing, of the visual artists who are working, of the political situation around you. Those collisions make the work exciting. Thinking about this is an alive and amorphous process that is very specific to the people in the room who are making theater with you. If you’re working with an exciting actor, that performance is going to be bigger than what you can imagine in your head when you’re reading the play. As the director, you can offer what you’re imagining, but then somebody else is going to bring their perspective and imagination to the table. Nine out of ten times, the thing that you create together is more interesting than what you thought of by yourself.

You are drawn to “difficult” texts. What makes a text difficult?

Sometimes the challenges are spatial, sometimes they’re literary, and sometimes they have to do with palatability. You have to figure out how to solve that problem, how to
tell that story, how to make that moment. And it could even be something like: “The pig
turns into a princess.” And then you think, “How do I do that?” It’s funny when you read
it on the page, but when you actually have to make it happen, it entails a different set of
skills. If you figure that out, it will inform how you make other decisions about the play.

Before you read *Let There Be Love*, were you familiar with Kwame Kwei-Armah’s work?
I was very familiar with his directing, but not so familiar with his writing. I’ve seen
several productions that he directed, and I like his verve and his concern for humanity,
as well as his very generous point of view toward the world.

A.C.T. has done two workshops of *Let There Be Love*. What was that process like
for you?
A.C.T. was incredibly generous in making those workshops possible. [A.C.T. Artistic
Director] Carey [Perloff] arranged a situation where I could be at the table with Kwame
and a group of actors. We tried to tailor that experience to what Kwame wanted to
work on. Having the readings occur months apart from each other gave Kwame the
opportunity to consider the writing and fine-tune it further. Doing the readings with
talented actors and without the pressure of public performance, without having to solve
the staging issues, was a gift.

Kwei-Armah directed the original production at the Tricycle Theatre Company in
London. Did you talk to him about the direction you wanted to take?
Kwame has been really generous in telling me to do my own production, but he’s been
completely available to talk about the play as a writer. He hasn’t said, “I did this and you
should do it,” or “Someone else did that and you shouldn’t do it.” The play has not been
produced in a few years, so he was more than happy to start again and not refer back to
what he had previously done. I don’t know if Kwame is speaking to me only as a writer
and not a director—I don’t know if that’s totally possible. But our conversations have
been very text and character based.

How does the production at A.C.T. differ from Kwei-Armah’s original production?
I don’t know. I don’t want to know. I didn’t read reviews, and I didn’t look at pictures.
Whenever I’m directing a play that’s very close to the original production, I think it’s
a gift if I don’t see it, because if I do, I always have somebody else’s work in my head,
whether I want it there or not. When you’re working from just your imagination, it’s
more conducive to creating something new.

You tend to collaborate with the same cadre of actors, designers, and producers again
and again. For this play, are you working with artists with whom you’ve previously
collaborated?
The lighting designer, Russell Champa, and I have worked together many times. I’ve also worked with the sound designer, Bart Fasbender. I have not previously worked with set designer Daniel Ostling or costume designer Lydia Tanji, who are both based in San Francisco. As a director, it’s always fun to encounter new people, because you have to evolve your own vocabulary in such a way that you can work with each other. Having familiarity with an artist and being able to go to the next level on the next collaboration is a very fun perk of creating and nurturing your working relationships. On the other hand, when you are able to work with someone new, there’s a different kind of excitement about bringing in their unique skills.

What conversations have you had with the rest of the design team about the type of world you want to evoke and the elements you’d like to emphasize?

Kwame used an exhibition called The West Indian Front Room [based on the living rooms of West Indian people in London, curated by writer and artist Michael McMillan] as an inspiration for the play. He said that when he saw the show, he thought, “Oh yes, that’s my grandmother’s house,” even though it wasn’t. There’s something so specific about immigrant communities and what they bring with them to create space in a new land. Any West Indian immigrant in London could walk into one of the rooms in the exhibition and think, “Oh, a Caribbean grandma lives here.” So the sense of space in this play is very specific. Kwame described it in the stage directions, and then he shared the source material with us.
Daniel and I wanted to make that front room, which is the very specific location of *Let There Be Love*, such that someone from the West Indies could come and say, “Oh my goodness, this could be my parents’ front room in London.” At the same time, we want to tell our San Francisco audience that we’re in London, in *this* time, in a home representing a specific cultural background that they may be curious to learn more about. Now we’re collaborating with A.C.T.’s prop department, and there are specific elements that we need to put into the set; there’s a very strong color palette that needs to represent the Caribbean-inspired space, but we also need to allow for the bodies in motion to be the most central aspect that audiences see. You don’t want to upstage the people with the furniture!

**What is the role of music in the play?**

The music of this play lifts it up and informs how the audience will think about the world of the play. Alfred is obsessed with the music of Nat King Cole, and the lyrics and music are part of the scenes. It’s always fantastic when a writer shares with you, through their characters, what the world sounds and feels like.

The play alludes to many of the larger conversations the United Kingdom is having about immigration and eldercare. How are these conversations relevant to U.S. audiences?

At the end of the day, it’s a play that looks at the difficult choices people make, and how we purposely create our families and our lives. There’s this collision between an older immigrant and a brand-new one, which happens in the United States as much as it happens in England. The bigger issues of how people adapt to a new culture, and how their children who are then born in the new country hold on to their family’s rich background, are relevant to everyone. And certainly, eldercare is a universal, and universally anxiety-provoking, issue.

**What’s the general approach you’re taking with *Let There Be Love?***

The play is about a very specific time and place, and I’m interested in the realistic details and information that we learn from understanding that time and place. Then there’s the challenge of successfully representing that dynamic, which might not be familiar to the audience, in such a way that it doesn’t become a sociology lesson but that you care about the characters. The writing does that for me. When I direct, it’s a matter of respecting and celebrating the play’s little gifts of otherness and then finding the larger human dynamic within that. I’m looking forward to being in the room with the actors to finish that story.
The Spirit Unbounded
An Interview with Actor Carl Lumbly

By Nirmala Nataraj

Although Carl Lumbly is perhaps best known for his television portrayals of such characters as CIA agent Marcus Dixon (*Alias*) and police detective Marcus Petrie (*Cagney & Lacey*), his first love is theater. “Theater is seminal for me,” he says. “The journey you have to make in theater, because you have to do it every night from start to finish, has a higher truth requirement. You get do-overs in film and television, but with each incarnation, the performance falls further away from some essential truth. Theater doesn’t do that. Since you’re responsible to an audience and your fellow players, the stakes are very high. I prefer it that way.”

While Lumbly tends to be hand-picked for roles as cops, teachers, and other authority figures that have forced him to cultivate and perfect “the mirthless, stiff-backed paragon of stolidity that was to become my calling card,” his portrayal of Alfred in *Let There Be Love* is in keeping with his penchant for taking on challenging theatrical roles. Lumbly has played a range of characters onstage, including a death-row sociopath (in Stephen Adly Guirgis’s *Jesus Hopped the A Train* at San Francisco Playhouse) and an enigmatic psychiatric patient claiming to be the son of an African dictator (in Joe Penhall’s *Blue/Orange* at Lorraine Hansberry Theatre). His versatility and empathy have been integral to these roles.

Lumbly spoke with us about issues ranging from how being the child of Jamaican immigrants contributes to his portrayal of Alfred to how his own understanding of death and atonement enables him to find common ground with his character.

What draws you to this play?

I just love the story. The name of the play, *Let There Be Love*, contains its elixir. Love is what makes possible things that seem impossible. Kwame [Kwei-Armah] is on to something here; Nat King Cole was on to it with his music, too. The play shows you that there is nobody who is not deserving of love. The play is also a chance for three actors to bond their spirits together to help bring this love to life. Somehow, Kwame makes it possible for the characters not only to be willing to learn from each other, but also to realize how important it is for them to do so.
Kwame Kwei-Armah has alluded to the importance of music in West Indian homes, and it plays a significant role in this play. What’s your personal connection to the music in *Let There Be Love*?

Nat King Cole was an international ambassador for love and a very quiet pioneer of race in this country and, certainly, abroad. Perhaps he experienced a rather sad and tortured set of episodes regarding race, but he didn’t allow them to change his essential nature. I have a lot of respect for him.

Alfred says at one point that it’s Nat King Cole’s music that keeps him out of England’s madhouses. I relate to that, and I definitely relate to Alfred’s love of music. In many West Indian homes, no matter where you go, there is some kind of record-playing device. I remember some of the treasured albums that transformed my father; they included ska, calypso, and country western—which I think reminded him of ska. Certainly, the themes are the same: rural people who aren’t talking about riches but about lost loves and gained loves and the simplicity of feet in rivers. I think this music took my father to happier days that preceded later disappointment.

Kwei-Armah based a lot of the play’s references on his own family, which is from Grenada. You are the son of Jamaican immigrants to the United States. Did you connect with Kwei-Armah’s depiction of West Indian culture and the immigrant experience in England?

Yes, especially in thinking about my father. He was a highly principled man, and he made the move from Jamaica to the United States for no other reason than to give his family a better opportunity, at a time when this nation was racially backward. I have a great love for America and its ideals and potential, and I also have a tremendous amount of anger at the manner in which lines are drawn—gender lines, racial lines, age lines—in a place that advertises itself to the rest of the world as a beacon of freedom and democracy.

As an immigrant and as a black man in America in the 1950s, my father probably felt like there was something he needed to prove, that his existence and his presentation in the world were an uphill battle relative to the images of black men that seemed to be most accessible in popular culture. In many ways, the representation of black culture is
getting better, and in some ways it hasn't changed. There's still a portrayal of a hyper-masculine maleness, a disregard for women, and a casual attitude about family and fatherhood that I don't find true.

Alfred is from the West Indies, where this racial representation is often the same, and sometimes, unfortunately, even worse. He’s had to live with the consequences of his actions, especially in terms of the relationship he now has with his daughters, and there's no way to atone for them. At the same time, he has a perspective that he can bring to Maria, who is part of the new wave of immigrants; while he is jealous of the fact that perhaps she gains some advantage because she’s not a black person, he sees that she’s still affected by the same things that plagued him. They share what so many immigrants share: the desire to live in a better world, and at the same time, to keep home in their heart, to never forget their origin story.

Kwei-Armah has said that he was inspired to write *Let There Be Love* after walking in London and hearing Asians and West Indians speaking about the more recent wave of Eastern European immigrants in disparaging ways.

Kwame is chronicling a paradigm shift. Younger generations of people are able to ride the wave of progress with pride, joy, and courage. Some of the people from the older generations are shocked by all the change; they are under the wave and are being inundated by it. Like Alfred, they think something will be lost and that their own survival is at risk. I think he is ultimately able to see past this because of the degree to which he is aware of his own self damage.

Many older immigrant men are in settings where they have created walls that perhaps they needed in order to protect themselves. My father was a very dignified person who was told when he came to these shores that he was less than a man. He had to assert himself against these lies every day. So to counteract those ideas, he created a fortress of manhood. It was good for protection, but it was also rigid and kept him walled in. There are many immigrant males who’ve had to do that. Such men can become despotic. Perhaps because I witnessed it, I could live my life in a different way. As a first-generation American, I was riding the wave of another paradigm shift. My generation had the benefit of feminism. I had to actively not be a part of the casual misogyny that I was privy to and raised with.

**How are you approaching the role of Alfred?**

As a writer and former journalist, I always write a backstory for my characters. When I wrote Alfred's backstory, I decided that he is a writer. In the play, he talks about herding his goats and looking around one day and realizing that all of his friends had left Grenada. He talks about traveling in the region, and then, after seeing Jamaica and Trinidad and the Bahamas and Martinique, he wonders what else is left. As a young man, he begins recognizing there is some quality of adventure required to live in the world beyond his small island.
There is a tangible colonial imprint on the West Indies. Depending on the island you're from, there's a power “out there” that is responsible for forming you, whether you acknowledge it or not. So Alfred decides to go to Britain. Making it there is more important than making it back home. For a while, he writes to his mother because he wants to chronicle this grand achievement, but he's not completely honest about how difficult it is. He writes romantically about the job that he finally manages to get at the hospital. Although he raises his daughters, he sees himself as a manly man, so he has “outside” women. He's the best womanizer in the region, he can drink you under the table, and he knows where the treasures are buried. Reputation is essential if you don't have respectability. In his mind, he has both.

Somewhere in his house, there's a box that contains his writings, just as on my computer, I have all sorts of files that don't need to be published but had to be written. Like Alfred, I continue to interpret life to make sense of it to myself.

You’ve said that these days, you’re drawn to playing characters who are less and less like you.

I used to be drawn to roles where I thought that I could assert positive ideas about black maleness. I liked playing characters who were noble or heroic. My roles were largely policemen, lawyers, stern fathers, and politicians. I don't necessarily relate any better to them, but my wanting to play them was attached to the anger I had about the negative ways in which black men were portrayed.

As I developed as an actor, I began to ask myself: If I were living under different circumstances, with limited options, if I were not well educated or lived a rural life or had been a slave, how would that look? Maybe those results would not be the results that I think of as being the best, but they are the best that person could have done under the conditions in which he lived.

When I started acting, the one thing I said I'd never do was play a slave; I've played two or three of them now. I learned a tremendous amount doing those roles. If you find yourself in a situation in which your prerogatives and sensibilities have little to do with the way you can make your way in the world, you're at the effect of some oppression. This requires character and courage, and it is a much more complex psychological study than what has been required for any cop I've played.

How are you approaching Alfred's connections to the two women in the play?

His relationship with Gemma is complex. They are estranged partly because they are both proud, and partly because of what he put her mother through, which she witnessed—so he feels some shame, which inhibits their closeness. Also, he knows that Gemma is gay, and he just wants her to tell him, but he hasn't created the kind of trust that makes that possible. He believes he can poke, prod, irritate, and that this will somehow shake it out of her. Perhaps if she had come clean with him sooner, they would have had an opportunity for the relationship that seems to be possible for them at the end of the play.
His relationship with Maria represents a wall that has been broken down within him. When she first comes into his home, he regards her as an interloper from an immigrant group that has it much easier than he did. His connection with Maria has to do with appreciation for shared struggle. He comes to see what she’s going through and realizes that she’s a beautiful spirit. It reminds him that he was once married to a woman who was also a beautiful spirit, and perhaps this new connection with Maria gives him an opportunity to make atonements.

**Given Kwei-Armah’s interest in writing plays that are largely about defining black masculinity, what kind of paradigm do you think *Let There Be Love* offers?**

When I think of Alfred, I think of the values of hard work and operating at the top of one’s intelligence. Alfred worked at a hospital, and I’m willing to bet he was the best hospital worker he could be. He took care of and stayed with his daughters, even though he was responsible for driving their mother away. He ended up not having a successful marriage, and the degree to which he is estranged from his own daughters has a lot to do with a problem he’s had with women throughout his life. Alfred’s male friendships are very important to him, but he never considered the importance of creating that kind of foundation in his own marriage, which accounts for so much of the pain and regret he feels later in his life.

I believe that in order to be whole, you have to accept those pieces of yourself that need work and represent your frailties, as well as your strengths. Kwame is a very classically “male” man, but he’s also aware of so much, which is evident in his plays. He’s able to give you a hug and has no problem crying or doing all the things that, when I was growing up, were viewed as signs of weakness. But there are more and more men being raised by other men who see the value of vulnerability and wholeness. My son has an easier time of it than I did, and I imagine Kwame’s son has an easier time of it than Kwame did. Hopefully, it will keep getting easier.

**How do you connect with the play’s themes of forgiveness and redemption?**

I once did a film called *South Central*, where I played a character who ends up in prison. My character exhorts another young prisoner, “Whatever you do, go back into the world
when you're released and save yourself.” That’s possible no matter how you live. There’s always a chance for redemption. And perhaps what you gain late in this life, you may take early into another.

I love Kwame’s portrayal of Alfred’s absolute inability to believe that this woman whom he hurt in the past could possibly forgive him; we discover that, while he still lives with this burden, she let it go a long time ago. I often see such examples of courage in women. Perhaps this is because women are capable of giving birth, or there’s something about the nature of being a woman that has to do with acceptance. In some ways, women have to understand men in a way that men don’t have to understand women, just as oppressed people have to understand the oppressor in a way that the oppressor doesn’t necessarily have to understand them.

I guess that’s what enables people to go through atrocities, to see people they love killed in front of them, to be brutalized but still reach out a hand to someone else and say, “This happened to me, but I’m going to reach for you and help you so that you understand it, and so that it doesn’t happen to someone else.”

One thing that’s especially poignant about this play is that it’s about a man who’s at the end of his life and knows it. How does that impact your portrayal?

The issue of dying with dignity is so crucial now. Despite the fact that there are special homes and institutions and machines that can keep us biologically alive, people with terminal illnesses are making the determination that they should have the right to end their lives if they aren’t living in the way that they wish. It’s a difficult thing to ask of one’s family, and because we’re not really good with death in this country and most of the Western world, there’s no easy way to prepare for it.

I want to do justice to the fact that Alfred’s death is the most courageous moment of his life. Maybe his best angels are arriving to help Maria, Gemma, and him to make the transition. The fear that he has isn’t about what comes after—it’s more about how to get out of this existence, and some of the pain of having to leave it behind while knowing there’s unfinished business.

Very often, it’s said that there’s a visible peace in people who stop struggling to stay here and accept that they are crossing over. I have been present at that moment, but I don’t know that I was able to see that peace because of my own distress about the fact that death was taking place; however, I know that I’ve had times when I was touched by a joy that I told myself was the result of that spirit reaching out to me. In death, perhaps you become aware of your spirit being boundless and attached to all other spirits. I think Alfred gets a glimpse of this. I want to portray the openness Kwame has given Alfred by the time we reach the end of the play; that spirit is what he shared with Nat King Cole. Throughout the play, he is so walled away from his essential being, the one who used to watch the goats back in Grenada, so to get that back, to claim it and know it before he makes his final journey, is something I’d like Alfred to experience.
The Musical World of

*Let There Be Love*

Nat King Cole, Lord Invader, the Sex Pistols, and Madonna

*By Shannon Stockwell*

Music and the radiogram (a contraption that includes both a radio and record player) have long been central to West Indian immigrant life in Britain. “The radiogram was essential and if you didn’t have one in your front room, you weren’t anybody,” said author and Guyanese immigrant Mike Phillips in an interview for Michael McMillan’s *The Front Room*, a photodocumentary and book about the interior designs of West Indian homes in the United Kingdom. “Wherever we went and whenever we gathered together, people would want to hear their own music from home. And the music was something that connected people to a sense of their original selves. Everything about the migrant’s life changed, nothing could be preserved, and you couldn’t move from a platform of established identity, so the radiogram in the front room provided a thread of stability in their lives.” In *Let There Be Love*, Alfred and Maria’s relationship gets off to a rocky start, but it is eased by their mutual interest in and love of music. The two listen to and connect over a wide range of songs by an eclectic assortment of artists, all from different genres but all with a profound impact on musical history.

**Nat King Cole** (1919–65) was born Nathaniel Adams Coles in Montgomery, Alabama, on March 17, 1919. His family moved to Chicago in 1923, where his father, Edward Coles, realized his dream of becoming a Baptist minister. Cole’s development as a musician began at an early age. He was already acquiring the unique enunciation that would become the hallmark of his singing career. “My dad insisted that you enunciate,” Cole’s brother Freddy said. “I remember one time I came in from school, trying to be hip and slurring words. That was a no-no.”

His vocal talent was developing with his hardly even realizing it, but he wouldn’t be known as a singer for quite some time. For the moment, young Cole focused on mastering the piano under the tutelage of his mother, Priscilla Coles, who was the organist at his father’s church. He began classical piano training at the age of 12 but was entranced by the jazz music he heard on the radio, particularly that of such legends as Earl Hines and Louis Armstrong.
Cole began performing in the mid 1930s when he was still a teenager, playing piano with his brother Eddie in jazz clubs. During this time, he acquired the nickname “Nat King Cole,” derived from the nursery rhyme about Old King Cole. After that, he became the pianist in the national tour of Broadway theater legend Eubie Blake’s revue *Shuffle Along*. The show went under in Long Beach, California, where Cole elected to remain.

Cole’s next big project was the King Cole Trio, comprising guitarist Oscar Moore, double bassist Wesley Prince, and Cole on the piano. The trio was extremely successful wherever they played, despite the initial assumption of music-hall owners that they wouldn’t be able to fill a dance floor with a three-person band at a time when big-band music was so popular. In fact, Cole’s innovative combination of double bass, piano, and guitar would influence jazz trios for years to come.

During Cole’s time with the trio, audiences began to recognize him for his soft, clear baritone voice. Apocryphal stories assert that he wouldn’t sing until a drunken audience member demanded it, but Cole later revealed that he just went along with that story because it was fun. In truth, he said, he sang mostly for variety between instrumental songs and discovered that people liked his voice: “To break the monotony, I would sing a few songs here and there between the playing. I noticed thereafter people started requesting more singing, and it was just one of those things.”

In 1943 Cole penned the song that would catapult the King Cole Trio to fame: “Straighten Up and Fly Right.” The lyrics tell a lighthearted, humorous story of a monkey getting a ride on the back of a buzzard, but according to biographer Daniel Mark Epstein, the song has been interpreted as an allegory for myriad issues, from race relations in America to drug addiction. Cole himself said that the tale came from one of his father’s sermons. Epstein notes that, no matter the meaning behind the song, “it elevates Cole to the ranks of storytellers, preachers, and poets whose images are so primal and rich in associations that they endure in the memory and become part of the living inventory of the collective unconscious.” The song was recorded that winter after the trio signed with the fledgling Capitol Records, and it became a hit. It reached number three on the pop charts in May 1944 and sold five hundred thousand copies.

In the late 1940s and early ’50s, the King Cole Trio began to record and perform more pop melodies. During these years, Cole recorded his most popular songs, including “The Christmas Song” (also known as “Chestnuts Roasting on an Open Fire”), which was recorded four times between 1946 and 1961. In 1946 he recorded “(Get Your Kicks on) Route 66,” which recounted the various stops along the famous highway that ran from Chicago, Illinois, to Santa Monica, California. “The song became such a part of the culture that when I moved to California in 1974, once I had determined the main highway on the map, I hardly ever had to look at it again after Chicago: I just ran the Nat Cole record in my head and aimed for the cities it specified,” writes jazz historian Gene Lees. “I doubt I’m the only person who ever did that.” The song, written by Bobby Troup, went on to be recorded by artists from Perry Como to the Rolling Stones to Depeche Mode.
Other famous songs from this period include “Nature Boy” (1948), “Mona Lisa” (1950), “Too Young” (1950), “Orange Colored Sky” (1950), and “Unforgettable” (1951). Cole and his trio produced hit after hit, and Capitol Records benefited greatly from the revenue, which helped the company pay for its iconic building in Los Angeles. Completed in 1956, the Capitol Records Building was the first circular office building and became known colloquially as “the house that Nat built.”

Despite Cole’s fame and general likability, he was a target of racially motivated hatred and even violence. In 1956 in Birmingham, Alabama, Cole was attacked onstage before playing for an all-white audience. As usual, he was self-effacing about the incident, saying, “I’m not a political figure or some controversial person. I’m just an entertainer, and it’s my job to perform for them. . . . In my way, I may be helping to bring harmony between people through music.” He came under fire from Civil Rights activists, who felt that he should be using his position as a famous black man to promote their cause more aggressively.

While he may not have been a vocal supporter of the Civil Rights movement, he made history with the premiere of The Nat King Cole Show, the first television program of its kind to be hosted by a black person. The 15-minute musical variety show, which
debuted in November 1956 and aired on Monday afternoons on NBC, was very successful among audiences. “Cole was happily photogenic, and the ballad singer had a rare gift of balancing deep inward reflection with warm, intimate eye contact,” writes Epstein. The show was extended to 30 minutes and moved to Tuesday nights in July 1957. Despite its popularity, companies were reluctant to endorse a show hosted by a black man, fearing that white customers would boycott their products. Without a national sponsor, the show was doomed to lose money. Great artists such as Ella Fitzgerald, Harry Belafonte, Mel Torme, and Eartha Kitt appeared on the show and accepted less payment to lower the show’s budget and support its continuation, but their help wasn’t enough. In December 1957, NBC moved the show to the Saturday night slot, but Cole knew the move wouldn’t fix the underlying problem; he decided to pull the plug.

In the late 1950s and early ’60s, Cole, along with his contemporaries, noticed that the pop ballads with which he had risen to fame did not seem to be selling well with younger generations; indeed, the singles that reached the top of the charts were almost entirely youth-oriented, largely rock-and-roll, acts. Still, Cole retained relevance. His first (and only) attempt at rock and roll, “Send for Me,” peaked at number six on the charts in 1961; that same year, “Let There Be Love,” similar in style to his 1950s pop ballads, was a number-one best seller in Britain.

After a brief and painful battle with lung cancer, Cole died on February 15, 1965—but his music and his clear, soft, articulate baritone live on. In the words of jazz musician and producer Dick Katz, his “deep groove, harmonic awareness, supple phrasing, touch, dynamics, taste, and just plain delicious music” have influenced generations of musicians and remain admired by critics, historians, and enthusiasts alike. “The musicality is just there,” says jazz musician Roger Kellaway. “It’s understood. It’s an assumption. His playing sparkles. And it seems effortless.” Aside from his mastery, Cole is beloved by fans for something more—a certain kindness and intimacy evoked by his voice. “At his best and most characteristic, Nat Cole was not so much a singer as a whisperer, or, as one might put it, a confider,” says music critic Henry Pleasants. Kellaway sums it up well: “When you hear something like this, you think to yourself, ‘Boy, would I like to hang out with that person!’”

It was this intimate element of Nat King Cole’s music that attracted playwright Kwame Kwei-Armah when he was writing Let There Be Love. “[Alfred] lives in this world all by himself, in this big house with no family, with no friends anymore—just an absolutely lonely existence,” Kwei-Armah says. “So I thought, ‘I need to give him something, some sort of musical friend, someone that he plays and has conversations with.’ And someone who made a huge impact on black music here was Nat King Cole. He represented a time in music when it was both sophisticated and beautiful, when it was both erudite and popular. Alfred could listen to him and think, ‘That’s my friend Nat.’”
Lord Invader (1914–61), born Rupert Westmore Grant in Port-of-Spain, Trinidad, was one of the most prominent calypso musicians of his time. Today, he is famous for his distinctive, gravelly voice and is best known for his song “Rum and Coca-Cola.” He didn’t just focus on simple island themes, however; like many calypso singers of his era, he was skilled at penning songs replete with political and social commentary.

One source of political inspiration for Lord Invader was the Notting Hill race riots. The 1950s saw an increase in London's West Indian population, and along with it, an increase in anti-black sentiment among the white working class—particularly among a gang called the Teddy boys. This tension erupted into violence in the summer of 1958, when nine white youths assaulted five black men and riots broke out.

In response to the tragedy, Lord Invader rewrote some of the lyrics to his 1945 song “Old-Time Cat o’ Nine,” referring to a multitailed whip commonly used as a form of judicial punishment in the United Kingdom. The song suggested that the best way to handle the gangs was to send them to Dartmoor, a notorious prison in southern England:

The only ting to stop these Teddy boys from causing panic in Great Britain
The only ting to stop these hooligan from causing panic in England
Well, I hope that the government
See they need another kind of punishment
I say one ting to cool down this crime
Is to bring back the old-time cat o’ nine
So the old-time cat o’ nine beat them bad and they bound to change they mind
Send them to Dartmoor with licks like fire and they bound to surrender

The Sex Pistols only released four singles and one studio album in the two-and-a-half years the band was together (late 1975 to early 1978), but they are credited with igniting London's punk-rock revolution. “Punk rock has never gone away since the Sex Pistols threw down the gauntlet, surviving over the decades as rock’s most combative and vital subgenre,” according to the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, to which the Sex Pistols were inducted in 2006. Their music and performances reintroduced a sense of danger to the world of rock and roll. The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame website explains, “This wasn’t the theatrical danger of Alice Cooper’s onstage guillotine but the very real possibility of injury to the body and a jolt to the senses.” The band was first made up of guitarist Steve Jones, bassist Glen Matlock (replaced by Sid Vicious in 1977), drummer Paul Cook, and the outspoken lead singer, Johnny Rotten, who said, “The great ignorant public don’t know why we’re in a band. It’s because we’re bored with that old crap. Like every decent human being should be.”

“Anarchy in the UK” was the Sex Pistols’ first single, written collectively by the band members and released in November 1976. The violent, incendiary, antigovernment nature of the lyrics (“Get pissed, destroy”) prompted their record label to drop them,
and radio stations refused to play the song—but controversy and censorship were exactly what the band wanted. “I don’t understand it,” Rotten said innocently in 1977. “All we’re trying to do is destroy everything.” At any rate, the sound was unlike anything anyone had heard before, and the Sex Pistols were catapulted to fame (and infamy). The band’s manager, Malcolm McLaren, said, “[Anarchy in the UK’ is] a call to arms to the kids who believe that rock and roll was taken away from them. It’s a statement of self-rule, of ultimate independence.” In 2004 the song ranked number 56 on Rolling Stone’s list of the 500 Greatest Songs of All Time. The magazine proclaimed: “This is what the beginning of a revolution sounds like.”

Madonna (1958–present), born Madonna Louise Ciccone, is an American singer/songwriter who first rose to fame in 1982 with her debut single, “Everybody.” She became known for her trademark fashion, which had a strong influence on 1980s style, as well as her revolutionary portrayal of female sexuality, her airy mezzo-soprano voice, and her over-the-top live performances. “Like a Virgin,” written for Madonna by Billy Steinberg and Tom Kelly and released on an album of the same name, became her first song to reach number one on the Billboard Hot 100. The song, along with her defiantly erotic performance of it during the 1990 Blond Ambition tour (for which she was nearly arrested and charged with public indecency by police in Toronto, Canada), placed Madonna squarely in the center of the sexual revolution. The lyrics incited controversy, and conservative organizations called for a ban of the song, saying it promoted premarital sex and promiscuity. In the Guardian’s 2011 list of 50 key events in the history of pop music, the release of the album Like a Virgin ranked number 31. The newspaper stated, “A woman in control of her sex life and career was such a new idea that Madonna became the biggest thing to hit pop, and popular culture, in years.”

Although the lyrics were risqué, the songwriters felt that the meaning was more romantic than critics interpreted it to be. Steinberg explains, “I was saying . . . that I may not really be a virgin—I’ve been battered romantically and emotionally like many people—but I’m starting a new relationship and it just feels so good, it’s healing all the wounds and making me feel like I’ve never done this before, because it’s so much deeper and more profound than anything I’ve ever felt.”

The last time Bart Fasbender’s sound design graced the Geary stage was in 2011, with A.C.T.’s production of *Humor Abuse*. *Let There Be Love* is “a little bit different,” Fasbender laughs. “Not quite so many diving-off-a-ladder moments!”

In terms of sound design, *Let There Be Love* is a departure not only from *Humor Abuse*, but also from his three current projects in New York: *Bright Half Life* at Women’s Project Theater; *A Month in the Country* at Classic Stage Company, starring Taylor Schilling and Peter Dinklage; and *Application Pending* at Westside Theatre. “I stopped counting the cues for *Application Pending*,” Fasbender says. “For all three productions, there’s almost never silence. There are always effects playing throughout.”

Though the actual sound cues it requires may be sparse, Kwame Kwei-Armah’s tender play about memory and forgiveness is inextricably linked to the warm music of the legendary Nat King Cole, which the curmudgeonly Alfred plays on his beloved Blue Spot radiogram, Lillie. “You have a problem in this world, Nat King Cole and Lillie guaranteed to have the answer,” Alfred proclaims cheerfully as he plays “Let There Be Love” for his new home assistant, Maria.

“Alfred is a shut-in whose only connection is through music,” Fasbender says. “It’s sad, but it’s also interesting how somebody can relate to some part of the world outside of themselves through music. Because he listens to the music of Nat King Cole, a lot of that world is Alfred’s memory of where he was and what his life was like.” Days after his first design meeting with director Maria Mileaf, we had the opportunity to speak with Fasbender, who provided insight as to just how important music and sound are to the soul of *Let There Be Love*.

You just met with Maria Mileaf. What was that conversation like?

This is our seventh or eighth show together, so we have a good understanding of how we work together. She introduced me to *The Front Room* [a book based on the 2005–06 art exhibition *The West Indian Front Room*], and we spoke about the importance of the radiogram, as well as Alfred’s place in the world, what kind of a person he was. She said that there wouldn’t be much in the show that wasn’t already called for in the script, so my role is to fulfill what’s already in the play. In some cases, I will sonically alter the sound so that the records that Alfred plays sound like they are being played on a radiogram.
But then I will also work on getting more out of the sound, because the radiogram is such a treasured piece, and the audience gets so much out of the music. Having the sound be literal in some situations will be fine—yes, Alfred puts on a record and it’s a little bit dusty and worn, and since the radiogram is a small device, it’s going to sound a certain way. But then I’ll build out of what we’re hearing through his ears and make it even more brilliant.

Do radiograms produce a distinct sound?

Apparently, Blaupunkt [German for “Blue Spot”] was one of the major manufacturers of radiograms and was the brand that everyone had, but there were a bunch of different brands. Looking at all of the different models, I don’t think that you could say radiograms make this sound, just like you couldn’t say that all radios make the same sound. It depends on the quality, the size, and the condition. I will look at the radiogram we’re using for this production, and based on its size and condition, I’ll give it a sound that most people would expect to come out of it. It’s like, if you saw a door, you could imagine how it would sound when it closes or when someone knocks on it. If you heard a sound other than what you were expecting, you’d notice it—if you heard a big metal banging and you’re looking at a wooden door, that’s not right. If the radiogram is a massive structure, it will have a certain tonal quality. If it’s just a small desktop unit with legs, then it will sound that certain way.

I think that for those times when the music is in the reality of the play, when someone puts the needle down, I will start with how the music would actually sound. Then I’ll move from there to the edginess when Maria puts on the Sex Pistols, or the subtly rounded tones when Nat King Cole is playing, and I’ll heighten certain elements of the sound.

What discussions will you have with the other designers?

One of the conversations will be with the costume designer, Lydia Tanji, to get a sense of where she thinks the costume changes might need a little bit of duration and where they’re going to be more than the actor stepping offstage, putting on a jacket, and coming back on. When we get closer to technical rehearsals in the theater, when she knows more about what she’ll be doing, I’ll talk to her about how long she thinks a transition will take, and then I’ll create a cue to fit that.
Other conversations will be with the set designer, Daniel Ostling, about incorporating my speaker plot into his set. Most of that is straightforward. I’ll need something by the television, I’ll need something in the radio gram, and then we have the sound of the phone, so I’ll want to have a speaker somewhere in there. But most conversations, getting into technical rehearsals and throughout tech and previews, will be with Russell Champa, the lighting designer, about how to approach transitions. And of course, we’ll incorporate Maria into those discussions, asking questions like, “Are we going to slam into this, or are we settling gently into the scene, and then settling gently into the transition?”

It sounds like that takes a lot of coordination.

That’s the fun part. I love tech because of it. The designers all have our own ideas and visions for this play. And then we see what the director and actors have created, and we put our ideas into that concept and work out exactly whose pieces fit together, and how. I love that part of theater, those conversations and contributions.

Aside from what’s written in the script, will the sound design include other elements?

Whenever a door opens onstage, I like to have the sound of the environment outside of the door. The reason I love doing that is not so much that it’s interesting to hear what’s outside, but because of the contrast that is created when the door closes and then there’s stillness. The opportunity of a front door or a window that gets opened or closed, and the contrast this gives to the space we’re in, is a touch I love putting into shows. It especially works for this play, because Alfred has become a shut-in and his music is his world. When the door is open and you hear what’s outside, it leaves Alfred open to an experience that he usually doesn’t like. When that door closes, it’s just him and whoever else is in that room. It’s palpable; all of a sudden, the walls are up. We get the extra contrast that’s achieved when we hear what is out there, and then, when the door closes and shuts that world out.

I find that level of subliminal communication to the audience very effective; they don’t really care that you hear something outside, but they might notice. It’s like when an actor opens a refrigerator onstage; it doesn’t really matter that there’s a light on in there. But if they opened it and there wasn’t a light in there, the audience would notice. It would take people out of the moment. So that’s also part of when Alfred has an open door or an open window—adding sound just makes it right, even if it doesn’t inform all that much.

We’ll also incorporate West Indian culture in the sound design. I’ll listen to a lot of stuff, try to break it down to the DNA of the music, and then abstract it so that I’m playing an essence of it that the audience can feel but not necessarily recognize. There are many large instrumental sections in Nat King Cole’s music that I’ll be drawing from to put into transitions between scenes.
Were you familiar with the music of Nat King Cole before you came to this production? Probably not much more than most people, but the sound of Nat King Cole is so distinct. His voice has such a pleasant roundness. A lot of people at the time, like Tony Bennett and Frank Sinatra, were doing this style of music—but Nat King Cole’s voice and tonal quality are very recognizable. So I’m familiar with him through exposure to everyday culture, commercials, and movies. I don’t think I’ve ever owned a Nat King Cole record, though. So I would say I have average experience with him. And that’s going to change!

Are you planning to do any research about Nat King Cole, aside from listening to his music? Yes, and I’ve already discovered some interesting stuff. I didn’t know he was such a lightning rod for trouble. When you listen to his music, it’s very charming, but he did create some divides. I guess that was because he was being accepted into white culture, which is something that segregationists at the time were fighting. They felt threatened by him, because acceptance of his music was encroaching on their whiteness. I don’t know how much of my research I can bring to this production, since much of the music is prescribed. But for my own sake, I think it’s fascinating.

Why is Nat King Cole so popular among West Indian immigrants, in both the United States and the United Kingdom? That’s a big question about race, class, and people of that culture wanting to separate themselves from others, so they attached themselves to music that was accepted by the white population more widely than other kinds of music. It’s just a fact that West Indian culture took in Nat King Cole more than any other musician at the time. When they moved to England, everyone listened to him. And apparently, West Indians listened to Nat King Cole on their radiograms in their front rooms. The music was popular, more popular than television, and the front room was the place for entertainment.

What are your thoughts on the title song of the play, “Let There Be Love”? It has a very hopeful sound, with the chord changes and the progressions; you smile when you listen to it. And the lyrics are about hope and acceptance. I could imagine it putting someone at ease in their last moments. Why Kwame Kwei-Armah chose it specifically, I don’t know, but I think it’s a good choice. Technically, it’s a beautiful piece to end a play, and emotionally, I think it’s a great piece with which to end one’s life. When Joey Ramone was in a hospital dying, he chose to put on U2’s “In a Little While,” which also has a certain feeling of letting go. Ramone could just relax to it. “Let There Be Love” is one of those songs; it settles you in, and you think, “Things are okay.”
In 2005 Kwame Kwei-Armah was moved to write *Let There Be Love* after seeing an art exhibition at London’s Geffrye Museum of the Home. The show, entitled *The West Indian Front Room: Memories and Impressions of Black British Homes*, recreated the front rooms of African-Caribbean immigrants of the 1960s and ’70s, while providing stories from the first wave of West Indian immigrants to England. The vivid installations, awash in a sensorial landscape of sights and sounds, struck Kwei-Armah profoundly, and from his memories of the “politics of my family’s front room,” the story of Alfred, Gemma, and Maria emerged.

In a recent interview with A.C.T., the exhibition’s curator, Michael McMillan, described the quintessential front room, which is derived from the Victorian parlor: “colorful floral-patterned wallpaper and carpet that never matched, a glass cabinet that displayed glass and chinaware you never used, plastic-covered sofas, homemade crocheted doilies, framed photographs . . . and other elements that embodied the family’s aspirations, prescribed codes of behavior, and moral values.”

The exhibition comprehensively addressed the cultural history of West Indian immigration in Britain and included nostalgic visual elements (such as crocheted decorations and framed images of black cultural icons such as Harry Belafonte and Nat King Cole) as well as the compelling first-hand narratives of immigrants.

McMillan, whose family hails from Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, notes that the exhibition reveals the struggles and social aspirations of the black diaspora. “For many of [the people in] their generation, moving from living in one room to having a front room in a home of their own was a sign that you had ‘made it.’ No matter who you were, if the front room looked good, then your family was respectable.”

McMillan, who is also a playwright and fine artist, met Kwei-Armah in 1988, years before the exhibition premiered. At the time, Kwei-Armah was acting in McMillan’s play *First Impressions*. After this creative collaboration, McMillan and Kwei-Armah kept in contact. However, McMillan says he was unaware that Kwei-Armah had seen *The West Indian Front Room* “until he told me it had inspired his writing *Let There Be Love.*” McMillan saw the play during its inaugural run at the Tricycle Theatre Company.
in 2008 and immediately connected with Kwei-Armah’s themes. “I was struck by how Alfred and his relationship with his home caregiver, Maria, signified the shifting landscape of migration in British society,” he says.

The concept for an art show based on the front room began during McMillan’s work in High Wycombe, a town just outside London. “I carried out oral history interviews with Caribbean elders about their experiences of coming to the United Kingdom,” says McMillan. “These interviews usually took place within the front room, and as I visited numerous homes, I had a sense of déjà vu.” McMillan recalls that when he was a teenager, the aesthetics of the front room had struck him as being in bad taste. “It was kitsch,” he says. “It also represented a colonial mentality that those of my parents’ generation brought with them in their suitcases to the United Kingdom.”

McMillan decided that if the front room summoned so many memories for him, it would probably resonate with others, especially immigrants of West Indian descent. When he was asked by the local history museum in High Wycombe to curate an exhibition, he decided to recreate the front room as an installation. There was no budget, but as necessity is the mother of invention, “I borrowed my mother’s and an auntie’s upholstered three-piece [furniture set], a drinks cabinet, a radiogram, and a picture of *The Last Supper.*"
Although the initial installation was basic, it was well received by black British audiences, as well as others from migrant and working-class backgrounds. It was eventually recreated at the Geffrye Museum as *The West Indian Front Room*, where the installation was contextualized by an interactive audio-visual and archival photographic exhibition, which had over 35,000 visitors. “In a postcolonial context, the front room resonated with migrant communities on an intergenerational level from Brixton to Brooklyn, Kingston to Toronto, Delhi to Southall,” says McMillan.

The exhibition’s success led to a BBC4 documentary, *Tales from the Front Room*, and international commissions. It was also recreated in the Netherlands as *Van Huis Uit: The Living Room of Migrants in the Netherlands* (2007–08). A couple of years later, *The Front Room: Migrant Aesthetics in the Home* was published by Black Dog Publishing (2009); for A.C.T.’s production of *Let There Be Love*, it has served as an important visual reference. McMillan’s extensive descriptions of the minutiae of the Caribbean home, from the ubiquitous paraffin heater to ornaments to the wallpaper and carpet, offer a vast repository of information that has helped assemble the world of Kwei-Armah’s play.

McMillan’s exploration of the importance of music among London’s West Indian immigrants is also apparent throughout *Let There Be Love*. The key item of front-room furniture on which Kwei-Armah decided to focus is the vintage “Blue Spot” radiogram,
a common feature in West Indian homes throughout Britain. The radiogram usually included a radio and phonograph housed in a wooden cabinet, sometimes with a drinks bar beneath it. Jazz, soul, ska, bluebeat (Jamaican rhythm and blues), calypso, and reggae were imported in the form of seven-inch vinyl records, which offered immigrants a sense of home “that they could listen and dance to,” according to McMillan.

The presence of the radiogram in Alfred’s front room is particularly symbolic of the West Indian immigrant experience in the United Kingdom. “Although music was important to the people of Alfred’s generation, they were often not welcome in many British pubs, clubs, and dance halls, so they would entertain themselves at home in the front room with the Blue Spot radiogram,” explains McMillan. “The music also echoes the intense desire and longing to go beyond the misery of oppression expressed through the hymns, spirituals, and gospel music of the black church.”

Some historians have suggested that the arrival of the television subverted the formality of the front room and led to its eventual disappearance. McMillan agrees: “Many of my parents’ generation have passed away, and their front room stuff has either been dumped or been used in my exhibitions.” Other West Indians have returned to their home countries, taking with them the contents of their front rooms. However, one can still occasionally find front rooms much like Alfred’s, where older West Indians cherish what they worked so hard to acquire.

“If we can reenter the front room metaphorically, we can find that embodied in its material culture, domestic practices, and social function are the morals, cultural traditions, aspirations, desires, and identities that have shaped so many immigrants consciously and unconsciously,” says McMillan.
A Bit of Hope, Light, and Poetry
An Interview with Scenic Designer Daniel Ostling

By Anna Woodruff

Let There Be Love’s themes of immigration, home, and aging are perhaps nowhere more apparent than in the play’s set design. Scenic designer and Tony Award nominee Daniel Ostling has created a unique mixture of visual elements for A.C.T.’s production, with a set that merges the old with the new, the bleakness of the London streets with the colorful warmth of the West Indies. Ostling’s previous A.C.T. productions are similarly rich; they include Stuck Elevator, a dramatic musical-theater tale about an undocumented Chinese immigrant who survives 81 hours in a Bronx elevator. Ostling has also worked at A.C.T. on Endgame and Play, Once in a Lifetime, Major Barbara, and The Orphan of Zhao. Additionally, his sets have graced Broadway, The Metropolitan Opera, and international stages. A member of Lookingglass Theatre Company in Chicago, Ostling teaches at Northwestern University.

Ostling’s set for Let There Be Love references elements of colonial history and West Indian–British culture, while subtly marking the transition from Alfred’s life to his death. Ostling says that the props and set design are integral to the audience’s reception of this play: “The props and the furniture are almost a character; there’s great power in that.” In a recent discussion with A.C.T., Ostling explained the set’s impact on the audience’s understanding of and emotional response to Let There Be Love.

When you first read through the play, what came to your mind in terms of design?

I loved the play’s mash-up of Englishness with West Indian and Polish culture. This play portrays people we don’t necessarily see onstage very much but who actually make up huge parts of this country and the world. It’s a story that doesn’t get told often, and the people represented by these characters don’t really have a voice in the larger culture. But it’s also a story that talks about something we’re all struggling with: getting older and wanting to live with dignity, wanting to feel a connection to our roots and a sense of belonging, community, and family—whether that happens with your biological family or with a stranger that you, for one reason or another, find yourself with.

The protagonist, Alfred, is a West Indian man who lives in a London row house [any of a row of houses connected by sidewalls]. Did this figure into your design?
Yes, very much. Kwame [Kwei-Armah] was inspired by a friend of his who curated an art exhibition in London. I got the book that was based on the exhibition, which was fantastic, because it reveals these blue-collar row houses in London that West Indian immigrant families moved into. Moving into these houses was a huge step up the economic and social ladder in London. Yet, at the same time, they brought West Indian aesthetics of color, pattern, and décor into their homes. The front room was a metaphor for and extension of assimilation. I think Kwame is playing with all of that.

[Director Maria Mileaf] did not want the set to have a realistic interior; she wanted something that’s more open-ended, a little more abstract, and fresher. I share those sentiments. We didn't want to have a specific architectural feel or sense of place. The architecture of West Indian–British houses and neighborhoods is very specific, so she wanted to have a sense of them being in a larger environment. Those are the energies we’re trying to include in the design.

How does the larger environment outside the room manifest in the set?

In my research, I was grabbed by the world in which these houses exist, which is filled with cookie-cutter Victorian and Edwardian brick row houses. They’re selling for a ton of money now, but during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, they were middle- or lower-middle-class housing for people working in factories. They remind me of the etchings in old Dickens novels of houses with grey London brick, with one after another going back into the smoke as far as you can see. Then, in the 1960s and
'70s, they became the tenements of modern housing projects. So one side of the set has Victorian houses that can be seen through the window, and in the background, through another window, you see more modern homes from the 1970s. In West Indian houses, there was such a bold and incredible sense of color, texture, wallpaper, and carpet, so we took those patterns and boiled down the intensity such that the walls are arranged in ways that filter a riot of color and texture. This, surrounded by the grey houses beyond the walls of Alfred's front room, makes for a collage feel.

While there are doors and windows, there are no moldings. The doors and windows don't open. The set is actually quite abstract, playful, and musical. Maria wanted it to be able to lift off at times, to be able to go into a poetic, lighter, more hopeful place, which is where I think the music is coming from.

Would you say that the music and the set work together?
I was listening to the music that's in the script, as I often do. I try to surround myself with the sounds and music of the world of the play when I'm working.

You are choosing to hand-paint the wallpaper instead of using generic wallpaper. Can you explain that choice?
Actually, the set is probably going to include a little bit of both. Let There Be Love evokes a particular time and place, so we are looking for specific patterns. We're using a combination of wallpaper and painting to get exactly what we want for a price we can
afford as a nonprofit theater. We are sourcing out as much wallpaper as we can; some of it will be the simple background color or very lightly patterned. Then we’ll paint over it extensively. For some of it, we will do more distressing than painting, in order to give the wallpaper a look of wear and tear. We will put glazes over other portions of the wallpaper to change the color.

Kwei-Armah’s set descriptions are sometimes ambiguous, with language such as, “The place is not dirty but is in need of a serious sort,” or, “The flowery wallpaper is almost back into vogue,” which situates the play in a liminal place. How do you interpret these directions?

Kwame is talking about tension. There is no simplistic representation of Alfred’s home, but rather, a tension in his house and its belongings. Life is full of tension and contradictions. Drama concentrates on the conflict within a scene, so those directions were really helpful in understanding what is happening in the play. The play is about a guy who has done well and has a nice house, but it’s also getting old and falling into disrepair. I think we can all relate to that. Maybe we redecorate our house or buy a house and fix it up so that we can control the world. It’s a way to show that we have taste, or that we’re successful. And yet we continue daily life, we get held back, we’re not able to keep up, tastes change, and things simply wear out from daily use.

The tension is also in the house’s whimsical décor versus the more estranged, controlled, cookie-cutter seriousness and lack of color of the outside. The tension is also in people who emigrate from the West Indies to London, from a hot land to this cold place. It is a violent experience for them to walk into this cold, wet land after they
come from the Caribbean. Many of them are used to a spacious natural environment, so moving into these cramped urban houses, one next to the other, is bizarre to them. For a designer, such facts are our bread and butter.

Some of the props in the play are particular to a certain historical period, so will the team have to obtain things like the globe bar or the radiogram?

Every time I work on a play, it’s a whole different world. It’s rarely the world I live in. I do a lot of research and sit down with the director and talk about what we want to include. I forward these suggestions to the prop department; they’ve got folders filled with research, and they will then go out and try to see what they can buy. Some of it we will be able to find, and some of it we won’t. Then we’ll ask questions like: “What if we found something else and reupholstered it?” or “What if we found a table and put new legs on it?” It’s a combination of finding things, altering them, and making things from scratch.

We have one set for the duration of the play. Will there be small changes in the set as time passes?

The set doesn’t move or change, but through Russell Champa’s lighting design, it will feel different at certain moments. We’re hoping the transitions between scenes will communicate change. We have some ideas of how we want to light the scenes so that they will become less solid over time. The lights around the set will make the color and texture float. And at the end of the play, when Alfred is trying to find release from what has become an increasingly difficult existence, there’s a bit of hope, a bit of light, and a bit of poetry that the set will shift into.

What are you most excited about in this production?

I think Kwame’s play is beautiful in how it represents people we don’t see onstage all the time. This old man and young woman represent how different generations and cultures are sometimes thrown together. That’s always exciting to watch.

Also, I am enjoying my collaboration with Maria. I love her energy, and I can hardly wait to get into rehearsal with her. What we’ve come up with is very different for me. It’s graphic and collage-like, with a very different aesthetic from what I’ve played around with before.

Maria told me, “What’s great is that people who don’t like abstract sets are going to feel like this is a realistic set. But it’s also going to work for those people in the audience who don’t like realistic sets and want theater to feel completely abstract, fresh, and unexpected.” That was a wonderful compliment. Essentially, the set will help audiences understand the play. It’s not going to confuse them in its abstraction or whimsy. The set helps ground us. We understand where we are and it helps us architecturally, but the set also lifts up and becomes a lighter, more beautiful, musical place.
Uniting Contradictions

West Indians, Poles, and London's Immigrant Population

By Nirmala Nataraj

The genesis of this play comes from walking down the street in Southall and hearing Asian men talk about “these foreigners,” the Eastern Europeans, who are “taking the jobs of our children.” I’ve begun to hear the same thing from West Indians, too, and I’m thinking, “Huh?” On the one hand, they’re claiming Britishness, saying, “This is our country,” which is a good thing. But on the other, it’s like, “How short is your memory?” I grew up when the streets were cold, when immigrants were beaten and stabbed and stones were thrown. So to talk that way about the new Eastern Europeans just shocked me.


Although London is often celebrated as one of the most diverse cities in the world, mass immigration over the last 50 years has resulted in a flurry of political and social commentary about the challenges of achieving a tension-free multiethnic society. Playwrights like Kwame Kwei-Armah have found creative fodder in the debate; Let There Be Love is, in part, a reflection on how immigrant groups can coexist and connect across diversity. Kwei-Armah reveals the differences and similarities in Alfred and Maria’s stories, as well as their struggles to balance a sense of belonging in the United Kingdom with connection to their home countries. The play subtly details London’s complex cultural landscape; despite the city’s melting-pot ethos, ambivalence toward the “newcomers” and hostility between different communities continue to mark the immigrant experience.

Immigration to Britain

Despite common knowledge, London has always been a city of immigrants, as its population is largely constituted of those who originally came to Britain from overseas. The city on the Thames has been a center of international trade ever since Roman invaders settled there two thousand years ago. The effect of globalization (as well as Britain’s history as a colonial world power) has only led to a greater influx of immigrants in search of better opportunities.
In the 1940s and '50s, foreign-born populations in London predominantly hailed from the West Indies and the Indian subcontinent. But since the early 1990s, British immigrants have come from a wider range of countries, including those in the European Union. Currently, India is the most common country of birth among the United Kingdom's foreign born, and Poland comes in at a close second. Between 1993 and 2013, the foreign-born population throughout the United Kingdom doubled from 3.8 million to around 7.8 million; that same year, in London alone, 37 percent of the population was made up of immigrants.

A 2012 special report in the *Economist* suggests that in its early years, when the city was established as a Roman colony, “London attracted foreigners partly because it lay off the coast of a continent [Europe] where bad things happened horribly often.” Through the centuries, London's cosmopolitan stature and political stability (particularly when compared to other European cities) were cemented. With the British Empire's establishment of colonies across the world and the global spread of the English language, London became home to a diverse array of immigrants. Today, for so many who hail from regions of the world torn apart by social unrest, political repression, and economic strife, London is a city that is synonymous with the promise of prosperity and stability.

The *Windrush* Generation and West Indian Migration

At the end of World War II, when there were labor shortages throughout Europe, the British government began searching for both skilled and unskilled laborers throughout Britain's present and former colonies, and beyond. The Polish were among the first groups to respond to the call and settle in the United Kingdom, partly due to ties made during the war years. But this didn't meet the nation's need for labor, and because Britain couldn't recruit enough migrants from Europe, it eventually turned to its colonies in the West Indies. Many men from the Caribbean had fought for the empire during the war, only to return to their lives back home with fewer opportunities. A desire for work
led them to the shores of the United Kingdom. Although some British politicians and a portion of the public were reluctant to allow immigration from the remnants of the nation’s quickly dissolving empire, the labor shortage gave them few other options. On June 22, 1948, the HMT *Empire Windrush* delivered 430 men from the West Indies.

During the early years of West Indian immigration to London, semiskilled laborers were employed to work in the furnaces and forges of the manufacturing industries, as well as in areas where they were needed as cleaners, nurses, or drivers—jobs that paid so poorly that white people seldom wanted them. Under these arduous new circumstances, connections to home became vital. Until the *Windrush* generation found their bearings, newcomers met up regularly to cook, share meals, listen to music, drink, and commiserate. This established a tightly knit West Indian community, especially in South London.

The threat of out-of-control immigration was overly inflated by both Labour ministers and their conservative opponents. Historians have suggested that the major issue was not about immigration but about the fear of nonwhite newcomers. Despite these sentiments and political motions to “keep Britain for the British,” after the first ship of West Indian men came to London’s shores, the city and the nation experienced the beginnings of mass immigration from across the world. In 1945 Britain’s nonwhite residents were in the low thousands; by 1970 this population had risen to 1.4 million, and a third of this number were born in the United Kingdom.

Unfortunately, as immigration rates rose, so did racial violence and prejudice. On top of the daily disadvantages faced by black immigrants, political pressure led to a number of legislative moves to make immigration for nonwhites more difficult. Black and Asian immigrants generally faced more hostility and obstacles to entering the nation than white immigrants. When the 1962 Commonwealth Act was signed into legislation to restrict immigration, Parliament specifically singled out Caribbean countries. By 1972 a British passport holder who was born abroad was only allowed to settle in Britain if they held a work permit or could prove that a parent or grandparent had been born in the United Kingdom.

In the face of white fear over the arrival of a black population, areas with high concentrations of immigrants, such as Birmingham and West London, experienced rioting and upheaval. In 1981 the South London district of Brixton (close to where Kwei-Armah grew up and home to Britain’s most populous West Indian community) experienced a spate of racially motivated riots. As police targeted young black men in an attempt to eliminate street crime, thousands of protesters took to the streets, resulting in violent confrontations between law enforcement and residents.

Over the last half-century, the West Indian population in London has made tremendous strides. They are often referred to as the pioneering immigrants who paved the way for other groups and inspired a number of reforms centered on the well-being and sociopolitical rights of both white and nonwhite newcomers to London.
The Polish in London

According to the Federation of Poles in Great Britain, roughly 750,000 people of Polish descent are currently living and working in the United Kingdom. Poles comprise the fastest-growing immigrant group in the nation today, and there have been several waves of Polish immigration since the late eighteenth century. Between 1772 and 1914, Poland virtually disappeared from the map due to the Partitions, a series of agreements made by Prussia, Russia, and Austria to annex and seize the country. In this period, Polish nationalists attempting to unite their country were forced into exile, along with their families; thousands of refugees dispersed to other European countries, including the United Kingdom. When Poland regained its independence after World War I, many Poles decided to stay in the countries where they'd settled. After World War II, when Poland's borders were once again remapped under Soviet control, thousands of displaced Poles sought asylum in the United Kingdom.

Over the years, more Poles arrived in London, primarily via official offers of work or study, short-term visas, and marriage. After World War II, most of the Polish women who came to Britain arrived as brides to first- and second-generation Poles who'd already made the country their home. Much like the West Indian community in London, Poles settled in places where Polish communities had already been established. Early Polish communities were primarily made up of men who found work in the meatpacking industry. Many Polish women ended up working in restaurants and hotels, and as nannies and cleaners. By 1951 over 160,000 Poles were living in Britain, 50,000 of them in London.

Although many of the Poles who came to the United Kingdom had the intention of eventually returning to Poland, and although their assimilation into the British way of life was fraught with challenges, many of them permanently remained in the country. This is most likely due to the number of financial opportunities that were available; also, travel between Poland and Britain became increasingly difficult, given the political and military tension of the Cold War throughout Eastern Europe. Poles in Britain faced the possibility of arrest if they returned to Poland, and at the very least were questioned by border control. Immigrants maintained contact with family still living in Poland through letters, phone calls, and occasional visits.

In 2004 even more Polish immigrants arrived in the United Kingdom, prompted by Poland's entry into the European Union, which granted Poles the right to move to and freely reside within other EU nations. London continues to appeal to Poles because it provides the promise of work, as well as opportunities for upward mobility. In 2011 the national census counted 579,000 Poles, a tenfold increase from one decade earlier. Since 2002 almost 1.2 million Poles have been issued National Insurance numbers (similar to Social Security numbers in the United States), allowing them to work and receive benefits in the United Kingdom. Politicians such as Jack Straw, the former home secretary of the Labour party, deemed the national decision to grant Poles free access to Britain a "spectacular mistake," but political antipathy has not lessened the growing number of Poles eager to make better lives for themselves in London and elsewhere.
The Evolution of Multicultural London

Since the mid 1990s, the number of United Kingdom residents born overseas has continued to increase by about 100,000 people per year. In 2003, 27 percent of London's workforce comprised foreign-born workers, compared to 5 percent in the rest of the country. Although immigrants continue to brave the struggles of climbing the social and economic ladder, their impact on modern-day London has altered the fabric of the city's culture. English is not the first language of 22 percent of Londoners. On a typical London street, you are likely to hear what linguists refer to as “multicultural London English,” which mels together Cockney and Jamaican slang, as well as languages spoken by youth from various ethnic groups. London's districts are also mapped along ethnic lines: the Koreans in New Malden; the Arabs in Bayswater; the Turks, Kurds, and Cypriots in Haringey, Hackney, and Islington; the South Asians in Southall and Wembley; and the West Indians in Brixton.

Given the rising number of residents who have not “integrated” into the dominant culture, some politicians argue that immigration will dilute the British identity and contribute to a decrease in the overall quality of life for the native-born. Others refute this by suggesting that social cohesion exists more readily in places with high levels of immigration. Now more than ever, communities of immigrants are less likely to be transient, and scholars have noted that the children of immigrants tend to do well in schools and institutions of higher education. Contrary to the claim that they are a “drain” on the system, immigrants are less likely to claim benefits and live in social housing than people born in the country.

Overall, London has been a home for refugees and revolutionaries, upwardly mobile citizens and those simply in search of work. Although London's diverse populations have created a civic culture that is vibrant, colorful, and exciting, Kwei-Armah and others have recognized a troubling dynamic in immigrant relations, whereby success is viewed as a zero-sum game in which different immigrant groups compete for limited resources, from jobs to housing. While diversity may contribute to the city's overall flavor, as-yet-unanswered questions arise from issues of integration, assimilation, and what it means for the United Kingdom to ensure equal opportunities for all its residents.

In Their Own Words
West Indian and Polish Immigrants on Life in London

MARIA: I been here year and half months. But I go home soon for holiday? I miss my home.

ALFRED: That never changes, no matter how long you here.

—Let There Be Love, by Kwame Kwei-Armah

The first large migration of West Indians to the United Kingdom began immediately following World War II, when the nation invited people from Caribbean colonies to help in postwar reconstruction. The “Windrush” generation of West Indians (named after the converted troop ship that brought the first several hundred Caribbean men to London), exemplified by the character of Alfred, overcame anti-immigrant sentiment and did much to pave the way for subsequent generations of newcomers.

As we got closer to England, there was great apprehension on the boat because we knew the authorities did not want us to land. I saw a man crying over the side because he thought we would be turned round. We heard there was consternation in Parliament and that newspapers like the Daily Graphic and the Express were saying we should be turned back. On the boat there was sadness about this. We knew we were not wanted.

—Sam King, passenger on the Windrush, from In Search of a Better Life: Perspectives on Migration from the Caribbean, by Ransford W. Palmer, 1990

We really thought the wages [in Britain] would be more substantial and they were not, so we couldn’t afford to save up. Although I am a British citizen, Jamaica is my home. A man or a woman who disowns their country is like a man who says their mother is not their mother.

—Eustace Ford, Jamaican immigrant, from the Moving Here project, Kirklees Museums and Galleries, West Yorkshire, United Kingdom, 2006

We thought Britain consisted of large white elegant houses, with long driveways. What I saw was the long rows of small houses, the constant smell of coal, and furthermore, the cold.

—Joshi Johnson, Jamaican immigrant, from the Moving Here project
When West Indians came to England from the 1950s onwards, it was like going to the moon. You couldn't get a sense of different streets because they all looked the same. The houses we came to live in were Victorian or Edwardian multi-occupied apartment blocks and looked like one immense building connected together with so many people coming in and out of them like ants. And so it took a long while to develop a frame of mind where you could distinguish one building from another. It was London and everything looked monochrome and monotone.


If you ever go to the Caribbean, make sure you get some white rum and coconut jelly; you have to get the young coconuts that don’t form a lot of flesh inside. The ones that you get in the supermarket here are old and dry; the juice inside doesn’t taste the same.

—Anonymous immigrant from Grenada, from the Moving Here project

We didn’t have a phone to announce coming over, but no matter where people were, they would stay in touch. Friends came round and I could entertain them. . . . And we played bluebeat music on the Blue Spot radiogram and from anyone coming from “home” is only two things we wanted: rum and records.

—Linda Small, actor and Jamaican immigrant, from The Front Room

The radiogram occupied a space like a religious object . . . it was a way of bringing back home into the new place through Caribbean music and black urban music. Though
it was sanctified like religious pictures or family photos in the front room, it was a subversive machine because it was carrying a different message: a message about the past, about memory, about home, about a new generation, about making a life in this rather inhospitable cultural climate.

—Stuart Hall, Jamaican immigrant and cultural sociologist, from *The Front Room*

At the end of World War II, the Polish population in London witnessed a surge; by the mid 2000s, many middle-class British families had a Polish house-cleaner in their employ. Like the West Indians, the Poles see themselves as being in temporary exile until they earn enough money to return home. Many of the criticisms waged against the West Indian community in previous generations have also been used to denounce Polish immigration. Common complaints include the notion that Poles are stealing native jobs, diluting national culture, and taking up housing, which is sparse in densely populated London.

Many of the new [Polish immigrants] come here and concentrate on earning money—working seven days a week. Some have two jobs and are sending money back to their families in Poland. Some work here for three or four months and then take time off over the summer or Christmas and go back to Poland for a few weeks and then return on the coaches [buses with transcontinental service].

—Jan Kosniowski, BBC interview, 2008
Many Polish people move to a new country in search of a new life—an easier life. [They] leave everything: paid job, home, family, wife and children, friends. After a couple of months or one year, they feel very lonely, because their life is not a proper life. They work overtime to send money to Poland, most of them do not speak English very well, and they share accommodation with strangers to make it cheaper. . . . We feel treated like people from a third-world country, because most British people know nothing about Poland—lots of them do not even know our capital city. I think it is really important to have open minds—both Polish and British people—and try to understand and get to know more about each other.

—“Agnieszka,” BBC interview, 2008

I've been living in the United Kingdom for two years now and I totally agree with the opinion that many British employers prefer Polish workers, as they work hard; unfortunately, the British know they can pay them less, which is unfair. Polish people are often disadvantaged because they don't know British employment law and general rules of the British labour market.

—“Monica,” in a response to a 2006 BBC survey

I came here because, even though I'm a well-educated woman, I was struggling with getting a proper job for proper money in Poland. I do not regret my decision, but also, I do not feel like I came to paradise. My husband and I feel like strangers here, and I know that this won't change, no matter how long we will stay here.

—“Beata,” in a response to a 2006 BBC survey
Let Me Down Easy

By Shannon Stockwell

Like many terminally ill people, Let There Be Love’s Alfred Morris consults Derek Humphry’s 1991 best seller, Final Exit: The Practicalities of Self-Deliverance and Assisted Suicide for the Dying. Frank and honest, this short book outlines the pros and cons of numerous methods of suicide, provides advice on making the decision, and discusses the various legal issues that might be faced by the person who assists the suicide. For Alfred, Humphry’s book is essential, because within its pages is the key to his idea of a “good death.”

When people are asked how they want to die, they tend to describe something short, painless, and often darkly humorous. “I want to be hit by a truck,” “I want to be struck by lightning after sinking a birdie on the eighteenth hole,” and “I want to live to be a hundred and be shot in the back by a jealous husband” are just a few of the many “ideal deaths” that palliative-care doctor Ira Byock has collected over the years. That these sudden deaths are the most appealing to us highlights the fear and trepidation we as a society have around our inescapable fate.

It’s not a new fear, by any means; as Dr. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross wrote in her seminal book, On Death and Dying (1969), “When we look back in time and study old cultures and people, we are impressed that death has always been distasteful to man and probably always will be.” But while death has always been scary, it used to be far more familiar. Before the turn of the twentieth century, when doctors could do little to stave off death, most people died rather quickly in their homes, cared for by family. Children were exposed to the cycle of life at an early age. People could find comfort in death’s familiarity and the knowledge that they would likely die surrounded by those they loved.

As time went on, doctors perfected surgical techniques and medication, and many people (especially those with the economic means to access health care) began to survive illnesses and injuries that once would have killed them. This has had a massive effect on Western society’s perception of death. We are so accustomed to doctors curing those who might otherwise die that, when someone is dying—no matter how old they are or how terminal their disease is—our first instinct is to take them to a hospital. There, we believe, doctors will cure the ailing, who will then be able to buy a little more time on this Earth. Of course, doctors are not miracle workers, so most people die away from the comforts of home, in hospitals where their surviving family members don’t have to deal with the remains or even witness firsthand the process of dying. Thanks to modern medicine, death has become unfamiliar in Western culture.
Scientific progress has changed not only the way we perceive death, but also the
diseases that cause it. As a person grows older—which medicine has made more
and more likely—the body inevitably breaks down and becomes more susceptible to
degenerative diseases. Because current life expectancies are so long, many end up dying
from such maladies as terminal cancer, Lou Gehrig's disease, Parkinson's disease, and
other illnesses with slow progressions. And although their prognoses are ultimately fatal,
modern medicine allows people to live with these diseases longer than ever before.

Such diseases almost never appear in "ideal" death narratives. But because they are
so common, they are often our most personal experiences of death, and they are not
always positive experiences: doctors resuscitating an elderly patient who was already on
the brink of dying; loved ones painfully wasting away, apologizing incessantly for being
a burden to their families; news stories about people in vegetative states with no hope of
recovery, kept alive for years with feeding tubes and respirators. With all of these images
so present in public consciousness, it's hard to blame someone for wanting a sudden and
painless death.

And yet, Byock explains, sudden deaths are often the most difficult for the surviving
friends and family to deal with. "In contrast to an abrupt, easy death," he writes, "dying
of a progressive illness offers precious opportunities to complete the most important of
life's relationships." Instead of a painful march toward oblivion, a terminal diagnosis can
become a gift. "Modern medicine [has] given us the gift of time—the time to prepare,
the time to heal family wounds, the time to bring psychological and spiritual closure,"
writes journalist Marilyn Webb, author of The Good Death. "If we can take advantage
of it, it has given us something unique in history: the time to tie up loose ends and
orchestrate a death that is good."

In a society as death-averse as ours, a "good death" might seem an impossible
contradiction, but there are as many ways to die well as there are people dying. While
everyone's particular preferences are unique, certain factors can make someone's death
a more positive experience: excessive treatment (which Webb defines as "treatment that
extends the process of dying longer than a patient wants it extended") is not given; pain,
as well as other symptoms that might threaten a patient's dignity (such as incontinence,
constipation, or difficulty eating), can be managed effectively; the dying are given the
power to make decisions about their treatment; and they get the emotional, spiritual, and
psychological support they desire.

The Power of Forgiveness

Throughout his years as a palliative-care doctor, Byock has identified five things he
believes we should say before we (or people we love) die: "Forgive me. I forgive you.
Thank you. I love you. Goodbye." Of these five things, the most difficult is forgiveness.
It might also be the most important; authors Peter and Elizabeth Fenwick write,
"If you are caring for the dying, the most valuable thing you can do for them is to
make sure they have the opportunity, however late in the day, to try to mend broken
or troubled relationships."
It can be difficult to forgive those with whom we have had a troubled relationship, and a terminal diagnosis doesn't necessarily make reconciliation easier. “As they approach death, the Dying usually act as they have acted every day prior to their terminal diagnosis,” say psychologists Maureen P. Keeley and Julie M. Yingling. “We all become limited by our daily routines, our habitual ways of responding and communicating. As we near death, we know no other way to be.” The same holds true for the loved ones of the terminally ill; a grudge can be held for so long that letting it go may feel nearly impossible.

But with proper therapy and care, it is possible for both the dying and the living to experience a change of heart. “The adage that people die as they have lived is a half-truth,” asserts Byock. “Even as they are dying, most people retain the capacity for change or, more accurately, growth.” In his memoir *Dying Well*, he tells the story of a man named Douglas Kearney, a 46-year-old husband and father who died of lung cancer. Already quick to anger before his terminal diagnosis, Kearney became prone to fits of rage and violence as his illness progressed. Eventually, Byock placed him in a 72-hour hold in a psychiatric ward, where Kearney was forced to confront his long-buried sadness. After accepting his sadness, he was able to face the damage his anger had been causing him and his family. After being released from the psych ward, he was able to ask his family for forgiveness, which enabled him to die in peace. Byock writes of Kearney:

> All his life, anger had been his reaction to disappointment and frustration; this emotion was familiar territory to him. He had no training in sadness, no experience with it. Sadness was an absolute unknown and thus terrifying. . . . Once he was able to cry and to acknowledge the depth of his own sadness, it lost its power. He was changed by the experience, but somehow more whole.

**The Gift of Stories**

One of the greatest and simplest gifts we can give the dying is to listen to their stories. World-renowned gerontologist Dr. Robert Butler observed that many of his older patients exhibited a tendency toward something he called “life review”: no matter what state of dementia the patient may have been in, they seemed to remember stories from their past with remarkable clarity and insight—and they were eager to share them. In the past, this process was often dismissed as a sign of senility, but Dr. Butler realized that, when family members encouraged reminiscence and reflection, patients became happier and calmer, especially if they were nearing death: “To a dying patient, life review can offer validation of the life that has been lived and a way of saying goodbye to family members,” he writes. “Fears about time running out may be reduced and replaced by an acceptance of the past and an appreciation of the here and now.” He postulates that the process of memory itself may cause a biochemical reaction in the brain that brings about a state of tranquility.

Byock also believes that it is important for the dying to share their stories, and he will often give his patients—particularly those in the early stages of dementia—tape recorders with which to save their memories. He feels that storytelling has many
benefits: it gives the dying a sense of having a place in history; it allows them to feel a sense of purpose and thus no longer dwell on being a burden to their families, friends, and medical staff; and it provides them with the opportunity to bestow a final gift upon their loved ones. Webb writes of Byock's method:

By recording these stories; by eliciting from them the wisdom generated by the experience of their own lives; by giving patients a sense of their own transcendent dimension by making them aware of having a past, a present, and a possible future—a legacy of a life story to leave for their loved ones—[Dr. Byock] is trying to give his dying patients a sense of an emerging soul that can survive beyond.

The Choice

Proper care can make dying more comfortable, but nothing makes dying easy. The slow breakdown of one’s bodily functions is, and will always be, profoundly sad and frightening. For some patients, it is an abhorrent process that makes suicide seemingly the best option—their preferred form of a “good death.”

Among the terminally ill, suicide is a rare and controversial choice. In Oregon, where assisted suicide has been legal since 1997, doctors wrote 155 prescriptions of lethal doses of medications for terminally ill patients in 2014. Of those 155 patients, 94 ingested the medication and subsequently died, out of an estimated total of 33,000 deaths from all causes in the entire state.

Many believe that the terminally ill turn to suicide because the pain of their disease becomes too much to bear, but pain is not the only reason for ending one’s own life. “The other kind of pain, that is harder to get at, I would put in the category of suffering—despair, hopelessness, anticipatory grieving, loss of control . . . and an altruistic concern about sparing loved ones,” says Carolyn Fitzpatrick-Cassin, former CEO of the Hospice of Southeastern Michigan. “And some people’s lives have just lost meaning at this point because they’ve said their good-byes and have the feeling of wanting this to be over.”

After one has come to the decision of suicide, obtaining the necessary prescriptions is almost as difficult. In many places, it is a crime for a person, particularly a medical professional, to assist or encourage someone else’s suicide. Because doctors fear legal consequences, they are reluctant to provide terminally ill patients with prescriptions for life-ending medication or even advice regarding suicide. A patient might be unable to obtain the support of a medical professional, but the desire to end his or her own life remains. Therefore, they might resort to illicit means of acquiring life-ending medication, or they might turn to other methods of suicide; without the support of medical professionals, both options have the potential to exacerbate a patient’s pain. It was this problem that Humphry’s Final Exit attempted to solve.

Since Final Exit was published, four American states have legalized assisted suicide: Oregon, Washington, Montana, and Vermont. In the United Kingdom, assisting a suicide has been expressly illegal since the Suicide Act of 1961, and offenders face up to
14 years’ imprisonment. But the attitude surrounding the issue is changing. In 2010 the Director of Public Prosecutions clarified the 1961 Act, making a distinction between cases of compassionate and malicious acts of assisted suicide; people who help someone end their life out of empathy are less likely to be prosecuted—particularly if they, like Maria, are not medical professionals (often, doctors face harsher legal consequences because they are seen as abusing their power to write prescriptions).

Some UK policy makers believe that public consciousness has changed so radically that the Suicide Act needs to be replaced altogether. To that end, Lord Falconer’s Assisted Dying Bill was introduced in June 2014 and is currently being debated in the House of Lords. The bill, based on Oregon’s 1997 Death with Dignity Act, allows legal adults who have been diagnosed as having six months or fewer to live to obtain prescriptions for life-ending medication. Like the Death with Dignity Act, there are numerous safeguards in place to prevent abuse. A psychiatrist must confirm that the dying has arrived at the decision entirely of his or her own volition. The bill does not legalize assisted suicide for people who are not actively dying, such as the disabled, the mentally ill, and senior citizens. Additionally, the dying must be physically able to administer the medication him- or herself; this is what makes assisted suicide distinct from euthanasia, in which someone else administers the life-ending medication for the dying.

Some politicians and citizens fear that, if the bill passes, overburdened families might push their terminally ill loved ones to choose assisted suicide. Additionally, they feel that, although the bill explicitly does not legalize euthanasia, it is the beginning of a slippery slope. Despite the opposition, the Assisted Dying Bill has received significant public support, including the endorsement of such celebrities as actors Hugh Grant, Sir Patrick Stewart, and Eric Idle, and author Sir Terry Pratchett. “Over the last hundred years we have learned to be extremely good at living,” said Pratchett, who recently died after an eight-year-long battle with Alzheimer’s. “But sooner or later, and so often now it is later, everybody dies. I think it’s time we learned to be as good at dying as we are at living.”

**SOURCES**

Aabid Hussain Khan was a citizen of the United Kingdom who, after returning from Pakistan in 2006, was arrested at Manchester Airport on suspicion that he was in correspondence with members of the Toronto 06 terrorist cell in Canada. He was alleged to have led a terrorist cell in Yorkshire and to have participated in a password-protected Jihadist online forum. In 2008 he was convicted in court and sentenced to 12 years’ imprisonment.

Brent Cross Shopping Centre opened in 1976 as the first stand-alone shopping center in the United Kingdom. It is located in the borough of Barnet, in Northwest London.

The British African Caribbean communities are residents of the United Kingdom who are of West Indian background and whose ancestors were primarily indigenous to Africa. In the United Kingdom, the largest proportion of African-Caribbean people are of Jamaican origin, but others are from such nations as Trinidad and Tobago, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Barbados, Grenada, Antigua and Barbuda, Saint Lucia, Dominica, Montserrat, Anguilla, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Guyana, and Belize. African-Caribbean communities exist throughout the United Kingdom, though the largest concentrations are in London and Birmingham.

Char is British slang for “cleaning woman,” deriving from “charwoman,” or “chore woman.”

Chicken roti is a West Indian recipe. The roti is a shell made of dough, which is rolled out flat, fried on a hot griddle, and then stuffed with a chicken curry filling.

Coolie was a term for manual laborers from Asia, particularly China and India, used mostly in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; today, it is used as an ethnic slur to denote anyone of Asian descent.

The Czech Republic, formerly Czechoslovakia, had a long history of border conflicts with Poland, which began in 1919, when the two newly created countries vied for contested land. The conflict was finally settled in 1958 with a treaty. Today, relations between citizens of the two countries are generally positive, but some underlying tensions and prejudices persist.
Czesław Miłosz (1911–2004) was a Polish poet and political activist. After World War II, which he spent working for the underground press in Warsaw, he emigrated to the United States and France; he did not return to Poland, where his work was banned, until after he won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1980 and the ban was lifted. The Nobel Committee said that he, “with uncompromising clear-sightedness, voices man’s exposed condition in a world of severe conflicts.” His poem “In Black Despair” was written near the end of his life.

Dawkins and Hawkins is a reference to jazz saxophonists Ernest Dawkins (currently active) and Coleman Hawkins (1904–69).

Derek Walcott (born 1930) is a Saint Lucian poet and playwright who won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1992. Many of his plays, which explore the state of the West Indies in the postcolonial era, have been produced by the Trinidad Theatre Workshop.

East Indian refers to anyone of South Asian (including Bangladeshi, Indian, Pakistani, and Sri Lankan) descent. The term is commonly used to differentiate this population from the West Indian community.

East London, also known as the East End, is the area of London east of the medieval walled City of London and north of the Thames River. The term began to be used in a derogatory sense during the nineteenth century, as the expansion of the population of London led to a high concentration of poor people and immigrants in the East End. Over the course of the century, the East End became synonymous with poverty, disease, and crime; today, it is a popular urban destination filled with trendy restaurants, boutiques, and a growing contemporary art scene.

“Faster than you can say I’m a Polish cleaner” is a derogatory reference to the stereotype of Polish immigrants arriving in the United Kingdom.

Final Exit is a book by Derek Humphry, published in 1992, that outlines different methods of suicide for people with terminal illness, pointing out the pros and cons of each. It also includes information about legal issues faced by those who might assist a suicide, as well as chapters about making the decision. Humphry, a journalist and the founder of California’s Hemlock Society, wrote the book after helping his wife, Jean, commit suicide following a long and painful battle with cancer. The book was a New York Times best seller and has been translated into 12 languages; in 2007, USA Today named it one of the 25 most memorable books of the last quarter century. It was and still is extremely controversial and is banned in France.

Gożdziki is Polish for “clove.” Cloves contain significant amounts of eugenol, which relieves pain, kills bacteria, and reduces inflammation; therefore, they are common in many natural health remedies.

Grenada is an island country and sovereign state consisting of the island of Grenada and six smaller islands at the
southern end of the Grenadines in the southeastern Caribbean Sea. It is located northwest of Trinidad and Tobago, northeast of Venezuela, and southwest of Saint Vincent and the Grenadines.

Harry Belafonte (born 1927) is an American calypso singer/songwriter, famous for his cover of Lord Kitchener’s 1946 “Jump in the Line (Shake Senora)” (1961) and “The Banana Boat Song (Day O).”

John Lewis is an upscale UK department store; it is the largest chain of its kind in the United Kingdom.

Lech Wałęsa (born 1943) is a Polish labor activist who helped create Poland’s first independent trade union (Solidarity). He won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1983 for his “contribution, made with considerable personal sacrifice, to ensure the workers’ right to establish their own organizations” and later went on to become the president of Poland from 1990 to 1995.

Life in the UK Test is the exam that all immigrants wishing to become citizens of the United Kingdom must take. In 2008 it featured such questions as: “What is the population of Wales?” “When is the national day for England?” and “What proportion of young people in the United Kingdom who became first-time voters in the 2001 general election actually used their vote?” Test takers must answer 75 percent of these questions correctly in order to obtain UK citizenship. The test was widely criticized
for being too difficult (many citizens born in the United Kingdom couldn’t pass), but officials stood by it. One government spokesperson said, “It’s got to be a genuine test. We’re comfortable with the fact that if people fail the test, they don’t get citizenship. The idea is that people demonstrate that they have an understanding of British society and culture and that’s what will enable them to integrate.” In 2014 the test was revised to include more questions about UK history and fewer about the European Union in general. As of 2014, the fee to take the test was £50 (about $80 in the United States).

“Make my day, punk” and “I’ll be back” are lines from the 1984 action movie The Terminator, directed by James Cameron. It stars Arnold Schwarzenegger as a cyborg assassin (the Terminator) sent back in time to kill a woman named Sarah Connor. In 2008 the Library of Congress selected the film for preservation in the American National Film Registry, deeming it “culturally, historically, or aesthetically significant.”

Next is a chain of department stores based in the United Kingdom; there is one in Brent Cross Shopping Centre.

Oxycodone is a narcotic used to alleviate severe pain. It has several common side effects, such as drowsiness, headaches, dizziness, stomach pain, nausea, vomiting, constipation, loss of appetite, dry mouth, and mild itching. Someone who has taken a lethal amount will experience extreme sleepiness and unconsciousness, followed by slowed breathing and, eventually, death.

Portsmouth Harbour is a large natural harbor in Portsmouth, Hampshire, south of London. It has long served as a major port of shipping and other maritime transit, including passenger lines.

Punch and Judy is a traditional, popular, and often very violent English puppet show featuring the characters Punch and his wife, Judy.

Queensway is a cosmopolitan street in the Bayswater district of London.

Radiogram is a combination of a radio and a gramophone, popular in the 1940s, ’50s, and ’60s. One of the most popular manufacturers of the radiogram was Blaupunkt (German for “Blue Spot”), a German electronics manufacturer.

Route 66 was one of the first roadways in the U.S. highway system, running 2,451 miles (3,945 kilometers) from Chicago, Illinois, to Santa Monica, California. It opened in 1926 and cemented its place in American cultural history during the Dust Bowl, during which citizens of the Midwest traveled to California to escape drought and seek riches. The song “(Get Your Kicks on) Route 66” was written by Bobby Troup in 1946 and recorded by Nat King Cole in the same year. The highway closed for good in 1985.

Shepherd’s Bush is a neighborhood in West London, known primarily for the Shepherd’s Bush Green, a major shopping district and home to the largest urban shopping center in Europe.
SIM (Subscriber Identity Module) cards are portable memory chips mostly used in cellular phones. Once installed, they allow people to use their phones by connecting to mobile networks. SIM cards generally do not work outside of the country in which they were originally registered, so in order to use a particular country’s mobile networks, foreign travelers must get new SIM cards to install in their cell phones.

**Sixth ring of hell** is a reference to Dante’s fourteenth-century poem *The Inferno*, which imagines nine layers—often called “circles” or “rings”—of hell; each layer features increasingly horrible punishments intended for specific types of sinners. The sixth ring is for heretics, who are condemned to an eternity in flaming tombs.

**Sorrel juice** is a red, tangy beverage made from the dried petals of the sorrel plant, ginger, cinnamon, cloves, orange peel, and sugar; it is popular in the Caribbean islands.

**Switzerland** has particularly lax laws regarding assisted suicide; it is only illegal if it is not the direct choice of the dying (i.e., if someone else convinces them that they should kill themselves). Therefore, Switzerland is a popular destination for terminally ill patients who wish to end their lives. The Swiss organization Dignitas has assisted more than one thousand suicides since its inception in 1998. Those who seek help from this organization undergo rigorous psychiatric examination to determine that they are sound of mind and that no one else is motivating them to make the decision.

**The Teddy boys** were a subculture in Britain in which young men wore clothes inspired by the dandy styles of the Edwardian period (“Teddy” being a nickname for Edward). The subculture originated in 1950s London but quickly became popular throughout the United Kingdom. Some Teddy boys formed gangs, which became infamous after violent clashes with others; the 1958 Notting Hill race riots, in which Teddy boys were implicated in attacks on the West Indian community in London, were the most notorious of these incidents.

**Theraflu** is a brand of over-the-counter medication designed to relieve symptoms of cold and flu viruses.

**Tottenham** is a suburban area of North London in the borough of Haringey. In 1985 some of Britain’s worst race riots took place there after a West Indian woman named Cynthia Jarrett died of heart failure during a police search of her home following the arrest of her son. The cause of the heart failure was never clear, but many members of the West Indian community believed it was a result of police brutality. The following day, community members gathered to protest institutional police racism. The demonstration turned violent when police tried to get the crowd to disperse and protesters killed a policeman named Keith.
Blakelock. He was the first policeman to be killed in a British riot since 1833.

Usain Bolt (born 1986) is a Jamaican runner who holds the world records for both the 100-meter and 200-meter dashes. He has won six Olympic gold medals.

The West Indies is a British term for the cluster of islands (Bahamas, Greater Antilles, and Lesser Antilles) that separates the Caribbean Sea from the Atlantic Ocean. The name derives from the period of fervent seventeenth- and eighteenth-century European colonialism, in which merchant companies needed to differentiate these islands from the East Indies (countries and islands in Southeast Asia and sometimes including India itself). This region is also known as the Caribbean.

Whiteley’s is a large shopping center in Queensway, London.
Questions to Consider

1. How does music, especially the title song, “Let There Be Love,” bring Alfred and Maria together? Are there experiences in your own life in which music acted as a vital bridge across differences?

2. How do the various elements of the play, from the set design to the music, inform your understanding of the characters, especially Alfred?

3. Kwame Kwei-Armah’s play was inspired in part by hearing long-term immigrants speak disparagingly about newer immigrants to England. Why do you think tension between different immigrant groups exists? How does Kwei-Armah reveal this underlying discord?

4. How does Alfred, as an older immigrant, overcome his prejudices toward the recently arrived Maria? How does this contribute to his journey toward forgiveness and redemption?

5. Throughout the play, Alfred and Maria reflect upon their experiences of finding home in London. How do their stories diverge, and how are they similar? What does “home” mean to each of them? What does it mean to you?

6. When did your family first arrive in the United States? What challenges did they face? How do they compare to those faced by Alfred and Maria?

7. How does Maria’s presence in Alfred’s life enable him to build a stronger relationship with Gemma? How does their journey to Grenada transform the relationship between father and daughter?

8. What does the concept of a “good death” mean to you?

For Further Information . . .


