MOON MAN WALK

by JAMES IJAMES
Directed by DAWN MONIQUE WILLIAMS

STUDY GUIDE

Livestream dates: Sept 25–Oct 3, 2020
On-Demand viewing: Oct 9–Oct 16, 2020
**Welcome to James Ijames's Moon Man Walk.**

A few weeks ago I had to go into our offices on Grant Avenue. I walked down half-closed Polk, then through the Tenderloin, past the shuttered Geary Theater, and by the fancy salons, coffee shops, and stores—some open, some not—of Union Square. I listened to Joni Mitchell’s song *Woodstock*, written for her friends Graham Nash, Stephen Stills, and David Crosby to perform as a brand-new band at the music festival she never got to. The song’s chorus provided for me a poignant soundtrack on my trek through the city. “We are stardust. (Billion year old carbon.) We are golden. (Caught in the devil’s bargain.) And we’ve got to get ourselves back to the garden.” The song is a plea for a reconciliation with our most elemental selves—our shared origins. It made me think of the state of our country and reminded me of being a kid in 1980 watching weekly with my parents the series *Cosmos*, loving that the universe was at once immense, yet closely held and shared.

Playwright James Ijames starts his play off with an epigraph by Carl Sagan: “We ourselves are made of star stuff.” The play then opens with the stage direction “An empty stage. Could be anywhere. The coast of the cosmos or the coast of the ocean. A lovely place. ESTHER, SPENCER, ASTRONAUT and PETRUSHKA stand on the edge of this space. They look up to the sky. They are re-membering this story. Putting it back together.” The playwright’s voice is so strong. He has me at the hyphenated “re-membering” that no audience will hear, but hopefully you will feel in this play’s rendering. How fortunate are we to step into this story in this moment, as we continue to teeter and sway on the edge of something ill-defined and uncertain. “Time is a construct,” has been said to me more than a few times in the last couple weeks. Feels that way.

I am excited to share this play virtually and live. Theater online remains a rough but intimate medium, where we can notice a welling of tears, or a blush below the skin, or feel a yearning to be seen. I know it will soar under Dawn Monique Williams’s direction. She is a valued member of the A.C.T. family and the Bay Area theater community. She fell in love with Shakespeare as an A.C.T. Summer Training Congress student and is now the associate artistic director at Aurora Theater Company across the Bay. This is her third time directing in the Conservatory at A.C.T. I look forward to this acting company of John Chukwudelunzu, Ashley J. Hicks, Jordan Maia, and Kaiy Watts, as they connect with each other and us through time and space.

*Moon Man Walk* feels a necessary meditation for the moment. It plays with time, memory, mourning, family, love, and possibility. Plot points drop in, like cards placed purposefully. The characters are richly drawn and the world spins both forward and back. Please relax as the protagonist Spencer re-members his way through.

Black Lives Matter.

Pam MacKinnon (she/her)
Artistic Director

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**Hello everyone,**

Welcome to our fall season!

We are pleased at the ingenuity and resilience of the team at A.C.T. As a producing theater we are driven to create. While many theaters are not producing theater right now, we are bringing you numerous creations virtually until we can be together in person.

We have found a way to keep artists working and to profile the talents of our MFA students as part of our mainstage season. You are witnessing some of the top actors in this country at the beginning of their careers. It is inspirational to experience their learning and growth at the same time that they are pioneering live virtual theater for the field.

As part of our commitment to equity, diversity, and inclusion, we are in the process of building a meaningful, continual relationship with the local Indigenous theater community. As part of this we begin by honoring the lands upon which we do our work. We would be proud to offer deep gratitude to the tribal band of Ramaytush Ohlone peoples and their lands that cover Northern California and down the Pacific coastline. Prior to the arrival of the Spanish in the 1700s, the Ramaytush Ohlone numbered approximately 1500 persons, and made their life on the sacred lands. Due to the invasion and the establishment of Franciscan Missions throughout California, only a few families survived and still remain. Those descendants make up the membership of the Association of Ramaytush Ohlone (ARO) today. We honor the Ohlone as a people, their resilience, and all they have done and continue to do in maintaining sacred and ancestral lands, ceremony, and communities to this day.

Thank you for being a part of this season. As a season pass holder, you have access to all virtual performances through June 2021. We plan on adding more events along the way, and those will all become a part of your package at no extra cost! If you’re coming to us by way of single tickets to this production, I hope you’ll check out the others we have to offer this fall. You can read more about them here. Then, stick around in December for our very first *A Christmas Carol: On Air*—a radio play adapted from our beloved holiday tradition.

One of the best ways you can help theaters navigate this time is to continue your commitment as a ticket buyer, as a donor, and to spread the word to your networks. Thank you for your participation. Enjoy the show!

With appreciation,

Jennifer Bielstein (she/her)
Executive Director
MOON MAN WALK

by JAMES IJAMES

Directed by DAWN MONIQUE WILLIAMS

THE CAST

ESTHER KAIY WATTS
SPENCER JORDAN MAIA
PETRUSHKA ASHLEY J. HICKS
ASTRONAUT JOHN CHUKWUDELUNZU

All cast members are students in A.C.T.’s Master of Fine Arts class of 2021.

STAGE MANAGEMENT

STAGE MANAGER ELIZA MASCOLL

CREATIVE TEAM

VISUAL DESIGNER MORGAN BADILLO
COSTUME DESIGNER JESSIE AMOROSO
SOUND & VIDEO DESIGNER BARRY DESPENZA
FACULTY VOICE & DIALECT COACH LISA ANNE PORTER
FACULTY MOVEMENT COACH DANYON DAVIS

PRODUCING TEAM

ASSOCIATE PRODUCER KEN SAVAGE
CONSERVATORY PRODUCTION MANAGER MIKE ANDERBURG
ASSOCIATE ARTISTIC DIRECTOR ANDY CHAN DONALD
VIDEO CONTENT PRODUCER BERYL BAKER

SPECIAL THANKS

LEANNA KEYES, RADHIKA RAO

ADDITIONAL CREDITS

Developed in The Lark’s Playwrights’ Week, New York City.

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ABOUT MOON MAN WALK

SUMMARY

While planning his mother’s funeral, Spencer stumbles upon a letter revealing the truth about his estranged father, which sets him on a magical journey through time and space. Along the way, he falls for a woman he meets on the plane and encounters a mysterious astronaut stranded on the moon. From the Whiting Award–winning playwright James Ijames, Moon Man Walk is a poetic look at how the stories we learn as children shape us as adults; it showcases the aspirations of minorities for a better future and explores the Black family in the age of Mass Incarceration. Originally written in 2015.

CHARACTERS
Actor 1 (30s) plays Spencer
Actor 2 (20s) plays Esther (Spencer’s Mother), Flight Attendant, Nurse
Actor 3 (30s) plays Petrushka
Actor 4 (50s) plays The Astronaut, Funeral Guy, Flower Guy, Kesi (Spencer’s Father)

This production contains strong language and mature themes. For additional context about this production, click here.

Share your show experience!
Tag us in your posts (@ACTSanFrancisco) and use the hashtag #ACTMoonManWalk
DIRECTOR’S NOTE FROM DAWN MONIQUE WILLIAMS

Writing this director’s note has been the most difficult of my career. This is the first full production I have directed remotely (via Zoom); working with four actors, each in a different state, across three time zones; all while fires ravaged the west coast, a hurricane brewed in the south, my mother contracted COVID-19, and being a professional theater-maker all of a sudden means being a digital content creator. Times are rough y’all. But the thing that had me most stumped is that I want to tell you Black Lives Matter, that Black stories matter, and I am honestly afraid some of you may not want to hear that. Well, Black Lives Matter. Today you have shown up for an affirmation of Black life, for an origin story, a creation myth. James Ijames’ Moon Man Walk is a beautifully poetic coming-of-age journey as the orphaned Spencer navigates the shift from boyhood to manhood; how the persistence of our matrilineal heritage has nourished the Black community; how love, in all its complexities, asks us to be our full selves, unashamed, clumsy, and afraid. Black life is rich and each day, in this “together apart” reality we find ourselves in, I basked in the glory, joy, curiosity, and immense talent of these actors who so proudly represent the African diaspora. If you know Ijames’s work, you know he is asking big questions, tackling sensitive subjects, meditating on what it means to live in THIS world. If you don’t know Ijames’ work, Moon Man Walk is a sublime entrée into his oeuvre.

JAMES IJAMES
(Playwright) is a performer, playwright, and director. His plays have been produced by Flashpoint Theater Company, Orbiter 3, Theatre Horizon, Wilma Theatre, The National Black Theatre, Steppenwolf Theatre, and Shotgun Players, and have been developed by PlayPenn, The Lark, Playwrights Horizons, Clubbed Thumb, Villanova Theatre, and Victory Gardent Theater. He is a recipient of the Terrence McNally New Play Award and the Whiting Award. Ijames holds a BA in Drama from Morehouse College and an MFA in Acting from Temple University, and currently serves as Associate Professor of Theatre at Villanova University. jamesijames.com

DAWN MONIQUE WILLIAMS
(Director) is the associate artistic director at Aurora Theatre Company. She is thrilled to be returning to the Conservatory having directed MFA students in TiJeann and His Brothers and A Midsummer Night’s Dream in 2019. Williams’s recent directing credits include: The Piano Lesson; Bull in a China Shop; By the Way, Meet Vera Stark; The Secretaries (Willamette Week’s top 10 Portland theatre productions of 2018); The Merry Wives of Windsor; and Romeo and Juliet. Awards include a Princess Grace Theatre Fellowship, a TCG Leadership U Residency Grant, and a Drama League Directing Fellowship. Williams is a proud member of Stage Directors and Choreographers Society. dawnmoniquewilliams.com

PHOTO NOTICE
The videotaping or making of electronic or other audio and/or visual recordings of this production, or distributing recordings on any medium, including the internet, is strictly prohibited.
WHO’S WHO IN MOON MAN WALK

ACTOR’S NOTE—FROM JORDAN MAIA

Working on this show has brought me abundant joy and familial introspection! I find that in the middle of my third year I am slowly unlearning and unraveling into who I was before all of the technique and “mastery.” The Moon Man Walk process is aiding in the pursuit of finding this gold stream of artistry or inner voice that I hope to strengthen over the years. My character, Spencer, is so comfortable in his own world that when a dark reality consumes him it simultaneously opens him up to a universal love that he’s never yet explored. I relate strongly to Esther’s character as well, but that is all part of the tale.

Enjoy ( כאן)
THEMES AND STYLE OF MOON MAN WALKING

THE METAPHOR OF MOON LANDING and MOON WALK

In the play, the mother/son relationship between Esther and Spencer is characterized by Esther’s choice to tell him detailed and creative stories from early in life, and one is about his father. From a young age, Spencer believes that his father was an astronaut who became stranded on the moon. The central metaphor of a Moon Walk and Space Travel is both “fanciful and heartbreaking” (Pfeffinger, 2015), highlighting simultaneously the absence of minority and Black astronauts, and aspirations of parents such as Esther to endow their children with dreams that they perhaps never could imagine for themselves. So far, a Black person has not gone to the moon.

Below is an excerpt from the play where Spencer finally meets his father, Kesi, and reveals the story that Esther told him:

KESI
So...what did she tell you about me?

SPENCER
Well...that...you were...

KESI:
What?

SPENCER
Stranded on the moon.

KESI
Huh? Where?

SPENCER
On the moon. With the Man in the Moon.

KESI
She told you I was an astronaut stranded on the moon? Didn’t you—

SPENCER
For a while I believed and then I discovered that there were no black astronauts until 1983.

READ MORE ABOUT THE MOON LANDINGS, SPACE RACE, AND CIVIL RIGHTS

Moon landings: What was the 1969 Apollo 11 mission?

How a Black Man was almost the first American to land the Moon

18 African-American Astronauts
In the play, characters “break the fourth wall” occasionally to share a thought to the audience away from the ears of the other characters on stage. The **fourth wall** is a performance convention in which an invisible, imagined wall separates actors from the audience. While the audience can see through this wall, the convention assumes, the actors act as if they cannot. Below is an example:

**PETRUSHKA**
It’s true! Fun fact. So… what’s taking you to Philadelphia?

**SPENCER**
(to us)
For the sake of expedient storytelling I will quickly experience the stages of grief:
Denial: Naaaaaaaaaaaaah Man!
Anger: FUCK THIIIIIIIIIS SHIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIT! NO NO NOOOOOOOO!
Bargaining: Take me and give me back my momma!
Depression: *(Sobbing. Christmastime Is Here from the Peanuts plays.)* Good grief… Acceptance:
(to Petrushka) My mother died last night.
(Fanfare. Smile)

**Question:** Why do you think Spencer breaks the fourth wall to address us, the audience?

**TIME TRAVEL**
Ijames’s play takes us from the past to the present (or should we say a previous time to a later time?). In the scene below, we go from Esther’s dad’s funeral to Esther’s funeral.

**ESTHER**
I will never go anywhere.

**SPENCER**
I’m sorry.

**ESTHER**
Stay here. I’ll go.

**SPENCER**
No. I’ll go.

*(Petrushka enters. Esther exits. Perhaps they see each other. Maybe not.)*

**PETRUSHKA**
You ready?

**SPENCER**
Yeah.

*(Esther kisses his forehead. She exits. Instantly we are transported to a flower shop.)*

**SPENCER**
This is it.

**Question:** What does this constant back and forth movement of time in the play signify?
LAUGHTER AS AN ACT OF RESISTANCE

In *Moon Man Walk*, Ijames’s dialogue present odd flashes of humor that emerge in the midst of death rituals. Ijames remarks, “I always start with humor. The reason I believe this is useful in political theater is that when you are laughing, what happens is basically the same as when you are weeping. Both are physical manifestations of release. When you are in a place of release or surrender, you can receive things that you wouldn’t receive otherwise. Laughter physiologically allows people to hear things in a different way. Some writers make people weep—the Old Greeks called it *catharsis*. I think humor does the same thing.

There are a lot of plays where I’ll script characters to laugh on stage. Oftentimes, it is a marginalized body that is laughing. First, I did it because it was rhythmically pleasing to hear the different ways in which people laugh, and actors are committed to doing things truthfully, so it’s always a really truthful laugh that feels good. Now I think it does do something—it is an act of resistance in the face of cruelty. It is an act of resistance to be happy when everything in the world is built in such a way that you should not be happy. There’s comedy, which I think is a different animal than humorous writing or a satire. Comedy is political in its own way.

Read more [here](#)

**Reflect:**

- When was the last time you laughed?
- What makes you laugh?
- What impact does laughter have you in your life?
In the play, Esther constantly lies to her son, Spencer about where his father is.

**SPENCER**
Where is he? *(referring to his father)*

**ESTHER**
*(A beat. Then a lie)*
The Moon.

**SPENCER**
What?

**ESTHER**
You seen those pictures of the men that landed on the moon? Before you were born?

**SPENCER**
Yeah

**ESTHER**
There. He one of them.

Questions:

Why do you think Esther lied to Spencer?

Have you ever lied out of a good intention? What caused you to lie? And what were the consequences?
“James Ijames’ gorgeously written play dwells in the loneliness of being an only child to a working single mother, the barriers we let down when genuine love wants in and the enduring power of the mother-son relationship, one of the most magical things in life.”—Philadelphia Weekly

**SPENCER**

In the last year or so, I didn’t visit her much. But we talked on the phone a lot. She was my biggest cheerleader. She was my biggest fan. Just don’t seem right for me to be talking about her in the past tense. I mean. She should be here. It’s hard for me to conceive of her not being with me and yet...well...here I am.

**Questions:**

How would you describe Esther and Spencer’s relationship?

What role do you think Petrushka plays once she enters Spencer’s life?

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**Standards Addressed (National Arts Standards/CA VAPA Standards)**

**Responding:** Understanding and evaluating how the arts convey meaning.

**Anchor Standard #7. Perceive and analyze artistic work.**

Prof:TH:Re7

Respond to what is seen, felt, and heard in a drama/theatre work to develop criteria for artistic choices.

**Anchor Standard #8. Interpret intent and meaning in artistic work.**

Adv:TH:Re8

a. Use detailed supporting evidence and appropriate criteria to revise personal work and interpret the work of others when participating in or observing a drama/theatre work.

b. Use new understandings of cultures and contexts to shape personal responses to drama/theatre work.
TELL ME A LIE: LET’S DO SOME IMPROV (OR ZOOM-PROV!)

**Purpose:** A fun and simple beginning improv game where 2 players work together.

**Procedure:**
1. Ask two players to take the stage/turn their cameras on.
2. The two players act as if have a close relationship (siblings or best friends).
3. Explain that you will ask the players a question about something mischievous they did and together they must come up with a lie (explanation). For example, “Josh, Amanda! How did my favorite jewelry end up at the bottom of the pool?”
4. One player starts, then turns to the other who continues the story, then they continue back and forth.
5. The audience may raise their hands and ask questions along the way.
6. Encourage the two players to work together to craft a consistent (if outlandish!) story.

**Other sample questions that could be asked (the sillier the better!):**

- How did our couch get stuck on the roof?
- Why does the house smell like anchovies and burnt toast?
- Why are the keys on the piano painted purple?
- Why are my oven mitts hanging from the ceiling?
- Why is the paparazzi gathered outside the house?
- Why are all of our doorknobs missing?
- Why are you wearing my wedding dress?

**Social Justice Twist**
Two actors play this game just like above. They are at a townhall or a debate stage—they are both on the same team/side. The remaining actors/students can ask these two actors a question that is political or controversial in nature, and the two actors jointly make up stories to justify their position.

**Sample questions could be:**

- Why did your company throw trash into the river?
- Why won’t you wear masks when you go out?
- Why have you been silent on Black Lives Matter?

National and CA VAPA Standards Addressed
Performing—Anchor Standard 4: Select, Analyze, and Interpret Artistic Work for Presentation
Prof.TH:Pr4
a. Examine how character relationships assist in telling the story of a drama/theatre work.
b. Shape character choices using given circumstances in a drama/theatre work.
Performing—Anchor Standard 6: Convey Meaning Through the Presentation of Artistic Work
Acc:TH:Pr6
Present a drama/theatre work using creative processes that shape the production for a specific audience.
How to Maximize Your Live Video Theater-Viewing Experience

By Ariana Johnson and Livian Yeh

Even though we can’t gather in person, live theater can still happen! Thank you for gathering in this virtual space for James Ijames’s Moon Man Walk. Below are a few tips to help maximize your live video theater-viewing experience.

**Know that this is a new kind of theater**
This isn’t like in-person theater performances, or film and television. In livestreamed theater, both audience and artists meet in a digital space, where art is created live and in real time.

**Embrace the medium**
Keep an eye out for the characters’ names, settings, and soundscapes. The artists worked hard to build a fully immersive virtual world despite physical distance.

**Engage with the fellow audience**
Once the show is running, there will be a chat function at the bottom of the screen, where you can converse with other audience members. Make sure you’re sending chat messages to panelists AND attendees. We encourage you to exclaim, react, and applaud!

**If possible, make sure you have a secure connection**
Use a wired internet connection, or make sure you are close to your router if using Wi-Fi. If the connection is very laggy or slow, reduce the quality of the video or turn off Wi-Fi on unneeded devices.

**For better sound/visuals**
Use headphones (ideally wired) for optimal sound quality and watch in full screen.