

SISTERS: THE FLAVA OF SOUP

& REALITY

by Allison Duke

"Yes, you're big, you're Black, you're bold, beautiful and talented, but do you have any experience?" reads the sign on the fictional door to the artistic community. You look down at the ho, bitch, ass-dialogued script clutched in your hand and wonder: How much experience do I need to play some doped-up, crack-head hustling tricks in the alley for drug money?

Reality Check One:

In the film and theatre industry, a person of colour without a curriculum vitae the length of Rodney King's drinking and driving rap sheet, need not apply for even these roles. There's no two ways about it. Blacks are subjected to a higher standard for work where they have no artistic control over their portrayal.

Reality Check Two:

When do I get to share my voice and tell the world my life just may be a little different from the scenario often type-cast for Blacks: a street hoodlum, nurse or cop. Just maybe I have a life like yours, my white counterpart, that is as exciting, interesting or complicated. One that involves more than one level of existence and weaves a tale of human condition like no other. Hot and spicy, sweet and saturated with irony. You

would never know unless you heard my voice, truthfully and uncensored.

Which brings us to Reality Check Three:

No coffee, no sweetener, no milk, no honey. Without more people of colour developing and producing works of colour, we can forget about acquiring the taste of success in our monumental struggle for artistic integrity within the art community. We must do it on our own. We must corporate our talents.

hurdle
that we
couldn't
get past,"
Lewis
explains.

"However, it was actually us that backed out. We liked the concept of the original work but it was more conflict-orientated than culturally-based. Maxine and I weren't entirely comfortable with it, so we decided to write, produce and direct our own play."

As a team, the potential of Bailey and Lewis proved quite promising. The OAC was so impressed by their professionalism, they allowed the duo to keep the money from the initial project to develop another play. After four months of intense writing, Bailey and Lewis merged the art form of traditional West Indian storytelling with Western drama to come up with *Sistahs*, a zesty two-act narrative drama that would star five Black females. The magnitude of the project eventually led them to form a production house in order to put the project together.

"We were interested in developing a professional artistic environment where the actress and support staff could actually get paid for their work," says Lewis. Following their share of frustration towards the industry, setting the standards in place as an authentic theatre company seemed like the most logical choice. First up was Melanie Nicholls-King, one of the actresses who landed a role in the original play. She was asked to audition for *Sistahs* and later joined Bailey and Lewis as the publicist.

Reality Check Four:

Now that you've got the company, how do you get production money? Being taken seriously as a operating business is a problem that many Black companies face. A theatre production house is no different. When approaching the OAC about production monies that met Equity standards, allowing cast and crew to be paid fairly, the governing body suggested they work as a collective.

"They took one look at us and we could see that they were thinking '*Three Black women working together, how cute*,'" Lewis comments. Repeatedly, they were faced with the reality that they, as a group of Black people, should not expect salaries comparable to professional actors or make money on their project.

Reality Check Five:


In order to sustain and operate a theatre production house as a viable financial entity you have to put out good product. With that goal in mind, Sugar 'n Spice Productions opted to use their funds for script

With the premiere of their play, *Sistahs*, launching a ten-day run beginning next week (October 20th), one such company challenging the omnipotent status-quo theatre industry is Sugar 'n Spice Productions—a full-fledged production house embodying the combined expertise of Maxine Bailey at the helm as artist producer, artistic director Sharon Lewis and publicist Melanie Nichols-King.

The original recipe for Sugar 'n Spice Productions was cooked two years ago by Bailey and Lewis, following a stroke of hard luck when plans to produce another play written by a local writer fell through. Although they shared a common vision of making the stage accessible to other creative Black women like themselves, the script failed to acquire dissertation rights and despite public funding from the Ontario Arts Council (OAC), it was not produced due to artistic differences.

"Getting dissertation rights for this piece was one

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A black and white photograph of three Black women. The woman on the left is smiling broadly, showing her teeth. The woman in the middle is looking directly at the camera with a slight smile. The woman on the right is also smiling and looking towards the camera. They are all wearing dark clothing. The photo is tilted diagonally.

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development with actors and finally present *Sistahs* as a work-in-progress to see if it was even feasible.

The ending of *Sistahs* wasn't even in place, but after receiving standing ovations during a three-day stint last October at the Poor Alex Theatre, the play scored big.

Lewis explains: "We wanted to see if people liked the script. We got a lot of positive feedback from the audiences. This was a good ego booster but on the artistic level, there were a lot of structural problems. It was far too didactic."

Subsequent workshops which included character rewrites, consultation with two professional dramatists, and the addition of cast member Shakura S'Aida as voice specialist, have resulted in what appears to be a sleeker, more theatrically profound *Sistahs*.

Although Lewis herself performs in the upcoming presentation of *Sistahs*, she promises audience members will notice a difference in the finished project, noting, "*Sistahs* now is more visual and I would like to think more theatrical."

The storyline is generally the same as the work-in-progress, except it has an ending. *Sistahs*, still remains an emotionally passionate play about Sandra (Melanie Nicholls-King), a Black woman nursing an ill-fated womb, who desperately struggles to bring

together her 16-year-old daughter, Assata (Carol Anderson), her lover, Dehila (Lisa Richardson), her sister, Rea (Kim Roberts) and family friend, Cerise (Shakura S'Aida) after a history of unresolved conflict.

The journey of healing Sandra attempts before reaching her destined fate is brilliantly metaphorized in a ritual-like preparation of a hot and spicy pot of West Indian soup. Flavoured with poignant discord spurred on by a series of successive political, sexual and cultural clashes that occur as the group of women cook the soup, the already well-seasoned plot thickens—taking you on a passage decorated with humour, satire, rage and fear.

Although the play casts five Black women, Lewis insists that it's not just a women's play; an obtrusive element of Black men, from a Black female viewpoint, provides a balance.

"These women are not just talking about politics, they are talking about men, about food, and about personal experiences. By listening to the way these women communicate, there's definitely something to be said about the role men play in lives of women of colour," clarifies Lewis.

Reality Check Six: After *Sistahs*, what next?

"There is still plenty of work to be done in the area of affirming out image," says Lewis. Even though Sugar 'n Spice Productions has provided the training enabling their lighting designer Rene Chan and stage manager Diana Sookdeo to land full-time contracts with established professional theatre houses, the company still faces its own difficulties obtaining the kind of financial support that would allow them to offer the similar opportunities.

"For the past two years there has been a freeze on operational funding, meaning even though our level of artistic integrity has improved we are still receiving the same amount of money to operate as a production house as we did two years ago," Lewis admits.

"Our future interest in soliciting commercial dramas, after *Sistahs* has completed its run, will be supported by continued not-for-profit activity," she adds. "We are insistent upon funding a platform for other playwrights to be creative."

Final reality:

Art mirrors life. The unification of women of colour as depicted in the creative element in *Sistahs* may be a reflection of the infrastructure that Sugar 'n Spice Productions has put into place to support Black women doing art—art about Black women. If *Sistahs* is any indication of the quality of work we can expect from this production house, ignoring them would be equivalent to perpetuating self-genocide within the Toronto theatre community.

Have you reserved your ticket yet? ☎