

“Sometimes When You Look the Future in the Face, It Makes You Act a Fool for a Minute Until You Catch Up”: Pearl Cleage’s *Angry, Raucous, And Shamelessly Gorgeous*

By Pancho Savery

At the beginning of Pearl Cleage’s 2022 work entitled *Angry, Raucous, and Shamelessly Gorgeous*, she acknowledges that her play is meant to be seen as in dialogue with the work of August Wilson in general, the “1990 protest piece by Anna Campbell entitled *Naked Wilson*, and the concept of “intersectionality,” the notion that one can be simultaneously oppressed in different ways, by different groups, for different reasons. One can, for example, be a Black woman and be oppressed differently, and also for both. Kimberle Crenshaw, the UCLA and Columbia law professor is the person who not only coins this term, but who is also a leading figure in the Critical Race Theory movement, a movement that looks at how racism is embedded in so much of US law. See, for example, her essay, “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color” in Critical Race Theory: The Key Writings that Formed the Movement. Ed Kimberle Crenshaw et al. New York: The New Press, 1995. 357-383, where she notes, “Because of their intersectional identity as both women and of color within discourses shaped to respond to one or the other, women of color are marginalized within both” (358).

August Wilson is perhaps the most celebrated American playwright of the late Twentieth Century, author of The Century Cycle, a series of ten plays, one for each decade, all depicting the struggle of African Americans to find some sense of self and belonging in the post- Civil War era. An in-depth look at one of his most celebrated plays, *Fences* (1987), can help us begin to see the issue. *Fences*, winner of both the Pulitzer Prize and the Tony Award for best play, tells

the story of Troy Maxon, former superstar in the Negro Leagues. By the time Black baseball players get into the Major Leagues and the Negro Leagues end, Troy, despite his prowess with the bat, is too old to make the transition. As a result, he has ended up as a refuse collector riding on the back of a truck and emptying people's garbage cans in 1950's Pittsburgh. Troy is, to a large extent, a bitter man, but Wilson clearly wants us to understand and sympathize with his situation. He hasn't been able to reach his full potential as a baseball player through no fault of his own. He has spent time in prison for killing a man, has as a result been abandoned by his first wife, and doesn't have a great relationship with his oldest son, Lyons. On the other hand, there are some significant issues with Troy. In the present, he refuses to support Lyons, who is trying to make it as a jazz musician, by never going to see him play, despite the fact that Lyons makes it clear that this is his life's passion and work. With his second wife, Rose, he has a teenage son, Cory, who is being recruited to play college football, but Troy refuses to support this. It seems clear that because Troy never had the opportunity to be a Big-League star, he doesn't want his son to face the same sort of sports racism that he thinks he has faced. His message to Cory is that the white professional sports world will never accept him simply because he is Black, despite his potential. Troy clearly tells himself that he is looking out for his son; and in Booker T. Washington-like fashion, he encourages Cory to learn a trade and work with his hands so that he can always have some form of income. The problem is that the times have changed, but Troy has not changed with them. It seems as though Wilson wants us to believe that Troy is doing the right thing, but he isn't. Over the course of the play, Troy constantly speaks in baseball metaphors. Encountering difficulty is the equivalent of "getting a fastball on the outside corner," but knowing how to deal with it. Serious mistakes are "strikes";

and as a baseball player, the goal is to never strike out. Troy is constantly calling strikes on Cory and warning him not to strike out. But interestingly enough, it is Troy, the baseball star turned garbage man, who has struck out as both a father and a husband. He refuses to see Lyons playing jazz; he refuses to allow Cory to play football; and worst of all, he cheats on his wife and fathers a child out of wedlock. Perhaps even worse than that, when the birthmother dies in childbirth, Troy brings the baby home and asks Rose to be her mother. This is in addition to financially ripping off his PTSD-afflicted WW II vet brother and eventually having him unnecessarily committed to an institution. It is hard to have much sympathy for Troy. When Cory confronts his father as no longer being the man of the house, Troy physically beats him, and kicks him out of the house forever. Interestingly, we don't get to see the reaction of Rose to her son's being kicked out. The play then jumps to several years later; Troy has died of a heart attack: Cory, now in the Marines, has come back for the funeral; and we are at that day. When Cory says he will not attend the service, Rose chides him, making a speech about how Troy did the best he could and should not be condemned. She even blames herself for not sufficiently asserting in the relationship. It is problematic that Troy has at least four strikes against him, including infidelity, but that Rose attempts to defend him anyway. The film version, starring and directed by Denzel Washington, ends with the main characters in the backyard about to go to the funeral. They look up to the sky and see a cloud formation that looks like an angel with wings, a clear statement in defense of Troy. This is not the only Wilson play in which women are subordinate characters; but it does provide an ideological backdrop to Cleage's *Angry, Raucous, and Shamelessly Gorgeous*.

The premise of the play is that a once-famous actor, Anna Campbell, known for performing her one-woman show, *Naked Wilson*, was essentially driven into exile because of the negative reaction to her response to Wilson's work, in which she nakedly recited male monologues from Wilson's oeuvre, and thus tarnishing Wilson's reputation. Her play is first performed in 1991, three years after the Broadway debut of *Fences*, so it is clear that *Fences* is at least one focus of the first part of the play's title. Anna, and women in general, but especially Black women, are angry at Wilson for his sexism. But interestingly, the anger directed at Wilson ends up being re-directed at Anna for tarnishing the great male playwright, followed by a third form of anger, Anna's, that she feels as though she has had to go into exile and leave the United States because of the backlash against her that has now lasted nearly thirty years.

Anna and her partner/manager, Betty, have spent the time living abroad, primarily in Amsterdam, where Anna has been lauded for her work. This continues a pattern that goes back at least to both post WWI and WWII, where Black artists such as Josephine Baker, James Baldwin, Sydney Bechet, Don Byas, Donald Byrd, Kenny Clarke, Miles Davis, Beauford Delaney, Eric Dolphy, Dexter Gordon, Johnny Griffin, Chester Himes, Langston Hughes, Ted Joans, Eartha Kitt, Claude McKay, Oscar Pettiford, Bud Powell, Nina Simone, Ben Webster, and Richard Wright all spent significant amounts of time in Europe in order to escape American racism (see Bertrand Tavernier's excellent 1986 film *Round Midnight*). After twenty-seven years abroad, Anna has decided to return to the United States to, she thinks, reprise her role in *Naked Wilson* one last time.

Cleage makes it clear from the beginning that we are meant to see Anna as a classic diva when she notes that Anna is "incapable of entering a room casually"; and when she does enter,

to the waiting Betty, both 65, she emotes the line, “What a dump” from King Vidor’s 1949 film *Beyond the Forest*, in which Bette Davis says the line to Joseph Cotton. The line is later repeated by Elizabeth Taylor to Richard Burton in Mike Nichols’s 1966 film version of Edward Albee’s 1962 Tony Award winning play *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* Anna’s saying the line is ironic and comic, as she and Betty are in a “luxurious hotel suite in Midtown Atlanta that contains “two bedrooms, a living area with couches, small dining table, wet bar, and French doors that open onto a private, walled terrace garden” (5), and that goes for \$500 a night. The two women immediately engage in a philosophical debate about the meaning of the concept “home.” Having a philosophical conversation about “home” in the context of having been in exile for twenty-six years and now returning, not knowing what your reception will be, despite decades of European acclaim, is no light matter. Where, in fact, is “home”? Is it the place you came from, however long ago? Is it where you were born even if you never lived there for long? Is it wherever you live now, always the experience of the present? These are all external associations. What if “home” is an internal, psychological concept? Can you legitimately call some place your “homeland” if you’ve never actually lived there? These questions don’t have clear answers, but they do point to the fact that for these two women, a discussion of “home” is not trivial, insignificant, or casual. When Anna says, “I want to go home,” it isn’t clear what she means. Does she mean some place in the United States, obviously not Atlanta where they are? Does she mean returning to Amsterdam? Betty’s response, “This is home,” also doesn’t make things any more clear. Does she mean the US is home? Does she mean Atlanta is home? Does she mean that anywhere you physically happen to be is home? This seemingly simple issue ends up being profound. Again, Betty insists that “This is home,” although what she means is unclear.

Anna's response is equally unclear, "That's where you're wrong. Home is a very long way from here" (8). Does she mean Amsterdam, Europe in general, or is she talking philosophically? In this context, it's interesting that in Cleage's character descriptions, Betty is described as "looking for a home," where Anna is described as "looking for a future"(5). A little later, Anna asserts that "We're going to do what we came here to do and in six months we're going to go home with tales of our American triumph, enough money to find a new place as grand as the last one, and all will be right with the world." Several things are at work here. It appears that by "home," Anna does, in fact mean Amsterdam, that they have had to downsize because of Anna's bad investment in what turned out to be a Ponzi scheme, and that the reason to come back to the US is to go on tour, and thus allow Anna to make enough money so that she can return to her status as "the reigning Queen Bee" (9).

An interesting exchange follows this in which Anna claims that after performing *Naked Wilson* in the US, "the powers that be drove me out of town." Betty counters this with, "No they didn't... You took a principled stand on an important cultural question, and subsequently discovered the whole world was your stage, moved to Europe, and never looked back" (9). This is an example of one of those classic situations in which two seemingly opposite propositions can both be true simultaneously. From Betty's perspective, Anna's position is to see herself too much as a "victim," looking at the negativity of what took place in the United States. Betty prefers to look at the positiveness of the opportunities that ensued, and sees the result as a "freedom song." Again, both of these can be true. Anna can be both victim and victor. Still, it is understandable that she has some trepidation about returning to the United States after almost three decades in Europe, where in addition to performing *Naked Wilson*, also performed as

Hedda Gabler, Clytaemnestra, and Medea, but whose last role she was offered was that of the Nurse in *Medea*, obviously a comedown. She also has some fear of how audiences will respond to the sight of “a mature female body” (11). This conversation is also interesting because, as with the conversations about “home” and exile, Cleage is bringing up the topic of the use of language. Throughout the play, we will see various debates that are not only about substance, but also about how language can be used in various ways to critique as well as to assert power and identity.

This gets us to the second word in the play’s title, “raucous.” Anna’s production of *Naked Wilson* was not only raucous because it told the “naked truth” about Wilson’s difficulties in fully portraying women. It went a significant step further in that Anna was literally naked on the stage. This obviously caused a sensation and an extreme negative reaction from both Wilson supporters and theatregoers in general. It is this double negative reaction that made Anna decide she had to leave the country, and also explains her trepidation in returning to the US to perform the show again, but also makes her wonder about the issue of body image. She first performed the piece when she was in her thirties, and is now 65, and possesses, again, “a mature female body.” It is interesting to think about the definition of the word “raucous, which is “a disturbingly harsh and loud noise.” It is also interesting to note that Anna herself is not the source of the raucousness; rather, it is the audience’s response that is raucous. This also raises the issue of the American response to nudity as opposed to that of Europeans, who are generally much more tolerant. The puritanical streak that runs through America is largely absent in Europe, thus accounting for the different ways Anna, and *Naked Wilson*, are treated on different continents. What is raucous in America is much less so in Europe. Because of these

differences, and despite the fact that she plans to perform *Naked Wilson* only once, Anna is rightly concerned that despite all the classic roles she has performed, that the American audience will only think of her in this role. And as we know, one of the chief characteristics of great actors is the flexibility to play many roles, and to not be pigeon-holed into just one. Betty tries to reassure Anna with, “The tour we are offering is an elegant evening of the most famous monologues in the Western theatrical canon performed by a visionary artist in her triumphant return to the American stage” (11). Once again, Betty has taken a negative conclusion or proposition by Anna and managed to turn it into something positive. Clearly, Betty’s role in Anna’s life is invaluable. And going back to Cleage’s character description, it seems clear that Betty has, in fact, found her true home in her care for, support of, and linguistic prowess in support of Anna. And as she reminds Anna, “You stopped doing *Naked Wilson* because you didn’t want to live in your rage and then made your reputation doing Lady MacBeth, Clytemnestra, Hedda Gabler. Those are some very angry women.” But as Anna correctly reminds her, “That’s different. It’s not my personal rage so it comes from a different place altogether” (13). This is all too true; the emotional toll of acting out your own personal anger and rage is quite different from embodying someone else’s. That being said, there is a more specific conversation about what caused the rage; not just about Wilson, but from Black male playwrights in general. As Betty notes, “We were mad about the boys... We were mad at how they kept making us be quiet so they could tell us what geniuses they were... They always had a scheme going to raise money to produce some guy’s new script. Sometimes they might even write a little part in it for one of us.” And as Anna adds, “But the story was always and forever about their blues, not ours... The thing is, just once, I really wanted these guys to think we were

interesting enough to put at the center of the story” (14). Once again, the rage is not just specific to Wilson, but to Black male playwrights in general; but this also raises a further issue. How possible is it for males to write deeply moving portraits of females? A little earlier, Anna mentions Tennessee Williams. Does he do a sufficiently good job in writing about women, especially in his early plays: *The Glass Menagerie*, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*? This is a subject worth thinking about. And what about the male playwrights whose monologues Anna performs: Aeschylus, Ibsen, and Shakespeare? Do they do a good job portraying women? That being said, fictional characters such as Betty and Anna clearly think the answer is no in terms of Black male playwrights; and one can, of course, look at the work of contemporary Black women playwrights such as Cleage herself, as well as Dominique Morisseau, Adrienne Kennedy, and Lynn Nottage, to see the in-depth portraits of Black women that are not matched. Despite limitations, Betty is still able to say, as Anna leaves for a massage, “I think we were blazing comets and shooting stars and marginal beings never seen before on the face of this earth. I think we were magnificent” (14). Once again, it’s good to take a moment to pause here. None of the difficulties these women have faced, and there have been many, have prevented them from being able to light up a dark world.

The scene then shifts to the arrival of Kate, the 45- year-old producer of the tour who is “looking for a hit” (5), who is outspoken in her belief that “the idea of a radical feminist critique” of Wilson “scares the shit out of people,” that Anna’s performing “alone on the stage, naked, just to make a point about women about the silencing of women...was nothing short of revolutionary,” and has now become “iconic” (15). The conversation between the two adds new details both to the history and the present: that Black theatres would no longer hire Anna, that

the piece was “too avant-garde for the college circuit,” and that “white theatres were already too invested in August”; so when “that company in Amsterdam offered her a residency, we sold everything and never looked back” (16). This is an example of intersectionality, of being oppressed for more than one reason at the same time. Much more significant is the fact that Betty knows that Anna will not actually be performing, that she hasn’t told Anna, and that she wants Kate to give Anna the bad news at the last minute. Anna apparently didn’t read the contract carefully. When she saw that *Naked Wilson* was going to be performed, she incorrectly assumed that she was going to be doing it, rather than “merely” being honored. This misapprehension caused Anna to lose weight and stop drinking. This does cause for a moment of pause. What kind of friend/agent is Betty for letting Anna believe something that clearly isn’t true? Things get worse when we not only learn that Kate has already hired someone else to perform *Naked Wilson*, but also that Kate doesn’t believe that there would be enough interest for Anna to do a national tour. Let us remember that this part of the play takes place on Thursday, that Anna believes she will be performing on Friday, and that this performance will be the initial stop on a nation-wide tour. None of this is true, and Anna knows nothing about it. She has, for all intents and purposes, returned to the US completely under false pretenses; although to be clear, there are two problems here. Anna did not carefully read the contract; and when Betty did, she did not fully inform Anna of the details. In addition, unbeknownst to Anna, Betty has decided that Anna no longer has any career possibilities in Europe, that she has “burned every bridge, hers and mine”(20), and that the only possibility is to return “home,” even though Anna has no idea that from her perspective, there is no possibility of returning to Europe in terms of having a continued career there. One of the interesting things revealed here is a

political dimension of the play. Betty argues that it is the right time to come back “home” because of what is going on. She argues that “When your country is doing great, moving forward with the big questions the way it’s supposed to, then you can look at it from abroad and critique it mercilessly,” because “you know things are moving in a positive direction”; and then quoting MLK, adds, “That the arc of the moral universe really does bend toward justice and your country is a pretty resilient place” (20). Given the time frame of the play, their leaving the US in 1992 and returning in 2018, this is a reference to the presidencies of both Bill Clinton (1993-2000) and Barack Obama (2009-2016), illegally interrupted by the second George Bush (2001-2008) and the hanging chads in Florida. Betty then goes on to note, “But when things aren’t going so well? When everything is up in the air? That is when you must come home. That is when all your other concerns have to be subsumed by your love of your country, or even the possibility of that love...you have to show up because you are a citizen and your country needs you!” (21). This is a not so veiled statement that 2018 marks the second year of the first Trump presidency, and that Betty’s response is exemplary. This also contextualizes Betty’s earlier comment that “I told them we were coming back to be part of the resistance” (8). On the other hand, it is unclear whether Anna actually shares these sentiments. More importantly, not only has Betty essentially lied to Anna, but it also turns out that Anna hasn’t worked in two years, she has been drinking a lot, they are out of money, and so the return to the US is more out of desperation than any sense of love of country.

Kate also reveals that the woman she has hired to do the show is a burlesque performer who dances on a stripper pole and whose only acting experience is in porn films. When Anna learns that she will not be performing, we get at least a fourth form of anger (Black women’s

anger at Wilson, the audience's anger at the raucous performance of *Naked Wilson*, Anna's anger at the response), and now anger that she is being replaced. In addition, Anna is extremely skeptical when she learns that the young woman, Pete, has never read any Wilson plays; but she does, somewhat reluctantly, agree to meet with her, especially after Betty paints a rosy picture of what their future life could be like, with Anna's taking up a residency at a college, presumably Spelman, and having adoring students listening to stories about her past. As an aside, the living situation Kate suggests to Anna is almost identical to the one Kate earlier imagined for herself and her boyfriend/fiancé, a place owned by her mother.

When Kate returns with Pete, Cleage describes Pete as "angry," "an urban wild child with no need for camouflage and an absolute need for self-expression (32), and as someone who is "looking for a change" (5). It's interesting to compare Pete's lack of a need for camouflage to Anna's need to prepare her "costume" to reflect that she is clearly in charge, even though she is the one being replaced, which, theoretically at least, should give Pete the power in the encounter, especially since she already has a signed contract to perform *Naked Wilson*. As at the beginning of the play, Anna once again makes a diva-like entrance and immediately tries to take over the conversation by informing Pete, in a "condescending" manner, that "Memorizing is not acting" (34). Pete counters with an incredibly interesting critique. She argues that *Naked Wilson* has missed the point, and that what would be preferable is that rather than have a naked woman perform Wilson's male monologues, the actor should be in an evening gown and diamonds, and instead perform Wilson's female monologues. She makes the excellent critique of *Fences*, and Rose's actions toward Troy that "If you keep lovin' somebody in spite of their bullshit, they got no incentive to change it" (35). This is a profound and accurate critique of

Wilson's work, and is even more remarkable coming from someone who has never actually seen a production of a Wilson play, and has only seen the filmed version of *Fences*. Anna's response, "This is crazy... I can't possibly allow her to do the piece" (36), frankly doesn't make sense. Yes it is true that Pete does not have in-depth knowledge of the body of Wilson's work, and yes, it is a suggestion to completely change *Naked Wilson*, which explains Anna's negative reaction. On the other hand, Pete's analysis of the problem with *Fences* is spot-on. It is totally true that Wilson fails to give Rose sufficient voice to speak her truth about her relationship with Troy. Cleage seems to be doing two different things here. On the one hand, she is making a general critique of Wilson and the way he deals, or doesn't, with women's voices. On the other hand, despite Pete's lack of experience, Cleage is offering an alternative strategy for how to present that critique through Pete. When Anna angrily responds with, "You don't even know what the piece is about! How can I expect you to embody it?" Pete has the great response of, "I know it's about great big men so in love with the sound of their own great big voices that women can't get a word in edgewise. And guess what? I didn't need August Wilson to teach me about that!" (36). Betty then suggests a kind of time-out, and that Anna and Pete need to speak alone. What follows is an amazing linguistic duel. Anna asks, "Is Pete your real name?" and Pete counters with, "Real is overrated." Anna goes to, "Your given name is Precious and you let people call you Pete?" Pete counters with, "I make them call me that." Anna then goes to, "You're a porn star" (37), and Pete counters with, "I'm not a star." When Anna asserts that because Pete performs naked all the time and that she (Anna) is "risking something" performing naked, Pete retorts with, "I'm risking everything." When Anna says, "I didn't know what you were," Pete counters with, "You could have said who instead of what. Same amount of air." (38). Four times during

their dialogue, Anna uses the phrase “no offense,” when she, in fact, clearly means to offend. Having had enough, and clearly the victor in the linguistic battle, Pete leaves, asserting, “And no offense, but you’re too old to do this piece” (39), angry that, from her perspective, Anna has shown her no respect. Anna’s angry response is to call the police and alert them to a public nude performance. Anna and Betty then get into an argument in which Anna, quoting Wilson asserts that *Naked Wilson* is “the ground on which I stand” (41), decides she is getting her own room, and then exits. How do we assess where things are at the close of the first scene? On the one hand, Anna has a right to be angry at the fact that she is being told at the last possible moment that she won’t be performing, and that her replacement is not only a “porn star,” but someone who has never read or seen a production of an August Wilson work. On the other hand, Anna has signed a contract that she clearly didn’t read and has incorrectly assumed that she would be performing. Pete is correct that Anna is too old to perform the piece; and despite never having read Wilson’s work, she is correct in her assessment of Wilson’s characterization of Rose in *Fences*. Cleage is arguing that much of the anger here, especially Anna’s, is misplaced, and that some form of resolution needs to be arrived at.

The next day we learn that after leaving the hotel, Pete went to the roof of the Margaret Mitchell House, dressed in red satin, and performed Rose’s final monologue from *Fences*, then sang “Oh! Susanna” in Spanish in homage to Anna, whose given name is Susanna, not after the Stephen Collins Foster 1848 song, but after the 1926 Langston Hughes poem “When Sue Wears Red” that begins,

*When Susanna Jones wears red
her face is like an ancient cameo
Turned brown by the ages.*

There are multiple ironies here. The first is that *Naked Wilson* is a text about the liberation of Black women, and it is being performed at a place where the thoroughly racist novel Gone with the Wind, depicting the “valiant” effort of the South during the Civil War was written. A second irony is the singing of “Oh! Susanna.” The lyrics of the original second verse begin,

*I jumped aboard the telegraph and traveled down the river,
Electric fluid magnified, and killed five hundred Nigger.*

Most people are not aware of this lyric because it has been changed over the years, but its origin should be noted, as well as the fact that the song was a part of the Nineteenth Century minstrel tradition; and that until 2018, there was a statue of Foster in Pittsburgh depicting him with a barefoot Black man playing a banjo at Foster’s feet. By performing this song in this place, Pete is taking back two pieces of racist history and redefining them from a contemporary Black perspective. The video of the event causes Pete’s two scheduled performances of *Naked Wilson* to immediately sell out, and two more are added. Having seen the video, Anna becomes transformed, causing her to admit that “I got it wrong” (49), that the video of Pete’s performance showed her being “wild and fearless and free and I couldn’t take my eyes off her,” and that “something brave and fierce and wonderful” (50) happened at the Mitchell House. She then goes a further step and says, “I don’t want to be the cranky old lady who sends the police to arrest an angel” (51). This is the key moment of revelation in the play. Anna has not only given up her need to perform *Naked Wilson*, but she has also accepted and praised Pete’s complete transformation of the play, and she has turned her anger into acceptance and solidarity. In looking back on her behavior, Anna utters the play’s key line, “Sometimes when you look the future in the face, it makes you act a fool for a minute until you catch up” (54), she

agrees to mentor Pete and teach her everything she knows, and she is able to go out on her own terms, something that has always been important to her.

The play has evolved from moods of anger, to the raucous, to the shamelessly gorgeous, and Black female unification has triumphed. I don't think we should necessarily see Cleage's play as an attack on August Wilson. What the play does is to open up spaces for Black women that for whatever reason, Wilson was not able to do. As a most obvious example, this is a play with all female characters, something Wilson was never able to do. Just as importantly, the play passes the Bechdel Test with flying colors. Black women come together, they talk about their lives, and they do that without concentrating on men. To once again quote Langston Hughes's poem,

*When Susanna Jones wears red
A queen from some time-dead Egyptian night
Walks once again*

and Pearl Cleage's play is most definitely a celebration of shamelessly gorgeous Black queens.