



The cast preparing to turn the platform. The Los Angeles Poverty Department in *What Fuels Development?* (Photo: Monica Nouwens, courtesy of the Armory Center for the Arts.)

pation of spinning the platform, Christina Collier, playing homeless advocate Alice Callaghan, forgot the lines to her monologue. Led by fellow actor KevinMichael Key, the cast encouraged her to continue: "Tell them what you know." In a later scene, Lee Maupin, another actor, forgot his lines and the cast said, "Tell it like it is. Don't be nervous." In both instances the actors were able to collect themselves and, while they did not recite the scripted lines, the words they uttered spoke to the performance's overall message. Neither Collier nor Maupin is a trained actor; in fact, the March 25th production was Collier's first LAPD performance. Although composed largely from the hearing transcript, as a devised piece crafted by Skid Row residents, *What Fuels Development?* speaks to lived experiences in Skid Row. As residents of the community in question, Collier and Maupin could convincingly ad lib their monologues. In the moment of forgotten lines and subsequent improv recovery, Maupin and Collier were able to draw on their community's labored engagement with policing and criminalization related to gentrification in order to "tell it like it is." With verbal support from their fellow actors they utilized their experiential knowledge to delineate the conflict.

But who were they telling it to? Who came to see the production? On the two nights I attended the performance the audience was overwhelmingly white, starkly contrasting with the predominately black cast. While admission to the production was free, in order to attend, individuals not living within walking distance of the Armory Center had to have access to transportation. While these limitations might suggest a reading of the performance as another display of black bodies and black suffering as a vehicle for white (middle- and upper-class) pleasure, the structure of the piece suggested otherwise. The

LAPD's exhibited control of the audience's movement, in combination with the presence of testimonies of Skid Row residents, framed the residents as active agents combating a gendered, racialized, and classed hegemonic system rather than as victims of capitalistic-driven endeavors. Performed in a city that frequently disavows the complexities of homelessness, *What Fuels Development?* served as one of many instantiations of dissident practice aimed at contesting the criminalization and dehumanization of Skid Row residents.

KIMBERLY CHANTAL WELCH
University of California, Los Angeles

Les Blancs. By Lorraine Hansberry, final text adapted by Robert Nemiroff. Directed by Yaël Farber. Olivier Theatre, National Theatre, London. May 31, 2016.

A tall, angular woman clad in strips of brown cloth and covered in battle paint advanced slowly across the stage at the beginning of the arresting revival of Lorraine Hansberry's *Les Blancs*, directed by Yaël Farber at the National Theatre. Accompanied by the sounds of drums and the call-and-response of a group of women elders, the haunting figure (a majestic Sheila Atim) eventually disappeared into the shadows, taking with her two spear-like objects—symbols of war—that she collected from the earth, and leaving in her wake myriad questions about the inevitability and messiness of revolution. Those questions would reverberate throughout Farber's epic reimaging of Hansberry's final play. Equally resonant throughout the evocative production were the vital debates it activated and staged about the complexities (and incompleteness) of the project of black liberation.

Les Blancs was initially produced on Broadway in 1970, eleven years after *A Raisin in the Sun* became the first play by an African American woman to open on the Great White Way. Hansberry had started drafting the play, however, nearly a decade earlier amid the various struggles for black freedom that began to proliferate across the globe during the 1950s and intensified in the '60s. Hopeful that the project could offer important insights about those movements and, indeed, inspire social action, she labored tirelessly on the script, reshaping and revising it even as she battled pancreatic cancer. The drama nevertheless was still a work in progress when the artist-activist died in 1965 at the too-young age of 34. As such, Hansberry's former husband and literary executor Robert Nemiroff, who



Sheila Atim (The Woman) in *Les Blancs*. (Photo: Johan Persson.)

assumed responsibility for realizing her vision, had to draw on old notes, outlines, and drafts to fashion the work into a performable text. Shrewdly, Farber, working in collaboration with dramaturg Drew Lichtenberg, sought permission to revisit the playwright's records and emend Nemiroff's production script for her National Theatre debut. The astute adjustments that she and Lichtenberg made to the play at once served to sharpen its storytelling and imbue it with a fresh sense of urgency. They also helped to accentuate the many tensions between the disparate worlds and worldviews that Hansberry represents and interrogates in the drama.

The performances given by the top-notch ensemble that Farber assembled at the National Theatre further illuminated and animated these tensions. Unfolding "yesterday, today, tomorrow—but not very long after" in a fictional African colony destined for an uprising, Hansberry centers *Les Blancs* on Tshembe Matoseh, an expatriate who, at the outset of the play, travels to his childhood village from Europe to join his two brothers, Abioseh (Gary Beadle) and Eric (Tunji Kasim), for the funeral of their father. Having left his family to seek better educational and economic opportunities abroad, Tshembe returns profoundly ambivalent about his homeland and the strengthening underground resistance movement to the prevailing colonial order that he once participated in and his father was helping to captain before his death. In a commanding performance that displayed tremendous subtlety and range and was full of revelations, Danny Sapani embraced the character's many contradictions. Tshembe's decision in the play's climactic moment to commit fratricide by shooting Abioseh, who, having joined the Catholic priesthood, opposed the clandestine insurgency and threatened to expose it, registered as unexpected and unsettling accordingly.

While Elliot Cowan's performance as Charlie Morris, the white liberal journalist who arrives in the colony from America on the same day as Tshembe hoping to write a story about the virtues of the medical outfit established there by European missionaries, offered fewer surprises, it was no less compelling. Hansberry uses the spirited exchanges between Charlie and Tshembe to explore arguments about a range of topics in *Les Blancs*, including the irrelevance of what Tshembe calls "the conscience of imperialism" and the impossibilities of forecasting the aftermath and aftereffects of rebellion and independence. Cowan presented Charlie as earnest, introspective, and, importantly, a capable interlocutor for Sapani's imposing Tshembe. Charming too, his Charlie also exhibited remarkable humor and vulnerability, especially when trying to woo Marta Gotterling (a reserved Anna Madeley), a physician he meets at the Mission who, like him, clings to a



Danny Sapani (Tshembe Matoseh) in *Les Blancs*.
(Photo: Johan Persson.)

romanticized view of the colonial enterprise.

As with the universally strong performances, the production's design elements—especially Soutra Gilmour's impressive set, which stretched across the Olivier Theatre's expansive stage—also helped draw attention to the sense of conflict and contradiction that suffuses Hansberry's dramaturgy. Gilmour perched her skeletal, yet grand rendering of the Mission on a revolve center stage. The fragile structure, which was often obscured by the vast darkness that surrounded it, served as a striking visual representation of the fears that many of the characters in the play maintained about a dismantling of colonial rule brought on by black revolutionary insurgency. Tim Lutkin's shadowy light design, with its heavy use of haze and avoidance of any look that evoked the glorious sunshine that blesses many African countries, complemented Gilmour's work effectively. Along with Adam Cork's atmospheric, occasionally ominous soundscape, it also significantly enhanced Farber's superb staging.

While Farber filled the revival with an abundance of stunning stage pictures and directorial flourishes, her most impactful choice was having the woman featured in the prologue—a stand-in for Africa and her Diaspora—return and disappear multiple times throughout the performance. In addition to presaging that the world of the play was one fated for rebellion, the woman's vanishing act reminded the audience that many of the questions about the project of black liberation that haunt *Les Blancs* continue to do so in the present. Farber's enthralling revival at the National Theatre invited spectators to reexamine those questions and contend with their knottiness. In so doing, it substantiated Hansberry's belief in the potential of *Les Blancs*, which she considered her most important work, to inspire fresh ways of thinking about the possibilities and challenges of revolution.

ISIAH MATTHEW WOODEN
American University