

# Ms. Blakk's Radical Queer History

Isaiah Matthew Wooden

I arrive at Steppenwolf Theatre Company's Lincoln Park location on a steamy evening in June 2019 ready to party. When I purchased my ticket for the world premiere production of *Ms. Blakk for President* by Tina Landau and Tarell Alvin McCraney several weeks earlier, I deliberately chose to sit in something called the "party zone." According to the theatre's website, the "party zone" promised an interactive experience that would fully immerse spectators in the electric energy of the show. While audience members would not be asked to join performers on the runway stage erected exclusively for the production, the website stated, there was a possibility that we could be directed to add to the chorus of cheers and jeers, hoots and hollers. Making my way to the company's Upstairs Theatre, a flexible space designed specifically to foster a more intimate relationship between spectator and actor, I warm up my vocal chords. Described in the promotional materials as "part campaign rally, part nightclub performance, part confessional—all party," I wanted to be able to respond enthusiastically when the time came to participate.<sup>1</sup>

A festive atmosphere awaits in the theatre's cozy lobby. Thumping dance music catches my attention first, and then the bar, where people are hovering and sipping on beer and wine. Plastered along the walls are layers of photographs, stickers, posters, and other ephemera accented by neon hues. There is a lot to take in. After doing a quick scan of the entire space, I decide to linger at an especially striking black-and-white poster. At its center is a commanding photograph of Ms. Joan Jett Blakk, the drag persona of performance artist, musician, bodybuilder, and activist Terence Alan Smith. The image captures Joan perched with her legs crossed, sitting in one of the high-back peacock chairs that Black Panther Party co-founder Huey P. Newton helped make iconic in the late 1960s. Donning black boots, black pants, and a black turtleneck complemented by dark sunglasses, dark lipstick, and a thick Afro, Joan cradles a white makeshift gun, which, along with

her tough facial expression, suggests that she is not somebody to mess with. The slogan printed across the bottom (“By any means necessary”), borrowed from Malcolm X, serves to affirm this assessment, and, perhaps more importantly, to underline the poster’s central message: “Joan Jett-Blakk for President.” As far as campaign materials go, this poster, with its artful invoking of the history of black radicalism, is especially clever and compelling. I study the poster so closely perhaps because of what it suggests about the personality and energy of the candidate and campaign at the center of the evening’s performance. Traversing the length of the thoughtfully curated lobby display reveals more and more about Ms. Joan Jett Blakk and her 1992 bid to become the U.S.’s first black drag queen president. I am particularly tickled and intrigued by artifacts featuring the campaign’s bawdy slogan: “I Want You, Honey! Lick Bush in ‘92!”

When the announcement comes that the house has opened, I follow the crowd into the theatre and locate my seat. The party is already underway, with the music now blaring even louder and a few people moving throughout the space, dancing to the irresistible beat. I join them, shimmying my shoulders while marveling at the details of the florescent environment conceived by designer David Zinn. The walls are saturated with evidence of the “image events” that activist collectives and grassroots groups such as ACT UP, Queer Nation, and Gran Fury crafted in the 1980s and 1990s to combat the threats facing members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer communities, including the HIV/AIDS pandemic, incessant attacks from the political right, and everyday harassment and violence on the street.<sup>2</sup> There are photocopied flyers of Gran Fury’s “Read My Lips” graphics on display, alongside bills announcing the release of Marlon Rigg’s 1989 documentary *Tongues Untied* and signs spotlighting some of Queer Nation’s cheeky mottos: “I’m Your Worst Fear, I’m a Fed Up Queer” and “Queer as Fuck,” among them. High above it all is another Queer Nation adage written in chalk: “An Army of Lovers Cannot Lose.” I am shaking my head in agreement when someone suddenly advances toward me, mumbles something quickly, hands me an orange sheet of paper, and darts away. Printed on the front of the page is the Queer Nation Manifesto: “An Army of Lovers Cannot Lose.” Though first distributed on the streets of New York City in 1990, the Manifesto’s call to join forces in love to fight against “oppression; homophobia; racism; misogyny; the bigotry of religious hypocrites and our own self-hatred” strikes me as being as urgent as ever. I take the stranger’s gift as a sign that the performance is starting.<sup>3</sup> It has, in fact, already begun. The music, the dancing, the atmospheric, and the fun (and funny) breaks into performance art are all a part of the evening’s proceedings. Even so, Ms. Joan Jett Blakk, the production’s ostensible star, has still yet to make an appearance.

Among the many reasons *Ms. Blakk for President* is a must-see event for me is the opportunity it promises to witness McCraney make his return to the stage as a performer. While he has enjoyed extraordinary success as a writer since making his professional debut with *The Brothers Size* in 2007—winning a 2017 Oscar Award for Best Adapted Screenplay for the film *Moonlight* and garnering a 2019 Tony Award nomination for the Broadway version of *Choir Boy*, among countless other accolades—the theatre-maker has, for the most part, avoided putting the acting skills he spent many years cultivating and perfecting on display for the public. Indeed, when asked in interviews about acting, he has often suggested that he no longer has the stomach for it. It came as something of a surprise, then, when Steppenwolf (where McCraney has been a company member since 2010) announced that it would present a revival of his play *Wig Out!* and that he would be featured in it. In addition to offering audiences a chance to experience one of the more evocative, though under-produced plays in his still-growing body of work, the production would also see McCraney pair up again with Landau, who directed the world premiere of *Wig Out!* at the Vineyard Theatre in 2008. She also gave McCraney one of his earliest breaks as an actor, casting him in her *Theatrical Essays* at Steppenwolf in 2004. Ultimately, the duo decided to postpone the revival, concluding that it would likely prove too challenging for McCraney to juggle revising the script while taking on the play's main character, Nina (they also expressed a desire to see a trans performer tackle the role). As McCraney explained in an announcement about the decision:

The Drag House culture that *Wig Out!* embodies is at its core mutable; the play even says so in the beginning, “By the time the play is produced, assuming it would be produced, all of the language and song may be antiquated.” This has become real true. AND THANK GOD FOR IT. I still hope to revisit and revise *Wig Out!*, but for now Tina and I want to focus on something that is current and bold and allows me to use some tools that I haven't exercised in a while: my acting.<sup>4</sup>

Surely I am not the only person in the house anxious to see McCraney exercise those tools. Of course, I am equally interested to see what fresh insights his collaboration with Landau will reveal about the rich history of radical black queer activism in the United States.

While, in more recent years, Ms. Joan Jett Blakk has received very little, if any, mention in narratives about the movements for queer liberation and the fight against HIV/AIDS, there is no question that both Joan and Smith were at the vanguard of the revolution. Indeed, there is considerable evidence that bespeaks the important role that each played in bolstering and advancing the fight against

homophobia, serophobia, and queer antagonism during the last decades of the twentieth century. In a 1993 essay published in *TDR* entitled “Joan Jett Blakk for President: Cross-Dressing at the Democratic National Convention,” drag historian Joe E. Jeffreys recounts some of Joan’s most subversive and impactful exploits, giving particular attention to the artist’s successful crashing of the 1992 Democratic National Convention.<sup>5</sup> “The Democrats never knew what hit ‘em,” Jeffreys explains, adding, “On the third and final day of their 1992 political hoedown in New York City’s Madison Square Garden, a visioned [sic] festooned in a red, white, and blue miniskirt ensemble, Queer Nation drag queen African American presidential candidate Joan Jett Blakk, appeared on the convention floor.”<sup>6</sup>

Jeffreys recalls how, just as New York City Governor Mario Cuomo took to the podium to give his speech nominating Bill Clinton as the Democratic Party’s presidential candidate, Joan launched into a speech of her own. “God, Joan Jett Blakk, the only drag queen presidential candidate in the United States. And I’m down here on this floor saying ‘Hi’ to all of America,” Joan began. “Here we are bringing Queer issues to the campaign. Right here, right now, in a dress! Are you ready for this? I don’t know if I am,” she continued.<sup>7</sup> The episode would also be captured in the 1993 documentary, *Lick Bush in ‘92*, along with several of Joan’s other escapades on the campaign trail—including marching in the 1992 St. Patrick’s Day Parade in Chicago wearing a red bob wig, green skirt, and an animal-print coat.<sup>8</sup> Given the significant contemporaneous coverage that Joan’s campaigns received (she also ran against Richard M. Daley in the 1991 Chicago mayoral race and challenged Bill Clinton again for the presidency in 1996), it is inexcusable that there are not more robust accounts of the significant impact she had in challenging the political and cultural status quo.

When Joan finally does take to the zigzagging runway, it is immediately clear how much she deserves the spectacular fête that Landau and McCraney have conjured for her. Through a series of vignettes, we get to witness how Smith’s commitments to world (re)making motivated him to take on the political establishment. We also get to see some of the opposition that the campaign faced, including from members of the mainstream LGBTQ community, who worried that Joan’s embrace of the radical potential of drag might drive away peers and allies. Perhaps most importantly, we get to meet some of the artist-activists with whom Joan forged community, and to experience the fire and rage that fueled their desires to engender and enact change. We follow Joan and her motley crew as they gather at some of Chicago’s storied queer haunts—including the nightclub Berlin, where she announced her presidential candidacy—and contemplate the direction of the campaign. We later travel with the group to New York City to carry out one of their most brazen actions. Most of the performance focuses on the planning



Tarell Alvin McCraney (Joan Jett Blakk) in Steppenwolf's *Ms. Blakk for President*. Photo: Michael Brosilow.



Jon Hudson Odom (Glenda and others) and Tarell Alvin McCraney (Joan Jett Blakk) in *Ms. Blakk for President*. Photo: Michael Brosilow.

and moxie it took to land Joan on the Convention floor. The obstacles were no doubt many: getting Joan past tight security in the patriotic, spaghetti-strap mini-dress and stilettos she procured to address her awaiting constituents was not guaranteed. Nevertheless, she persisted, cutting triumphantly through the throngs to deliver an inspired and inspiring speech. Much like the rest of the performance—it stages phantasmagoric encounters with Marilyn Monroe, David Bowie, Marsha P. Johnson, and other queer icons—the episode powerfully blends fantasy and reality.

This, to be sure, is no paint-by-numbers history. Indeed, Landau and McCraney create a lively extravaganza that is as audacious and idiosyncratic as the queer cultural workers who animate it. In between beats that consider the ongoing need for greater queer political power and visibility, they keep the celebration going, drawing on the power and possibility of the imagination to embolden different ways of being, living, and loving. McCraney's take on Joan is notably as gutsy as the blond wig and patent leather pumps that the character wears for much of the show. It is equally grounded and grounding, reminding us just how much Smith had to risk of himself so that others might have access to the rights and freedoms afforded to their straight counterparts. While Joan often appears brash, sassy, and confident in public, Smith, we learn, is not always so self-assured behind closed doors. The nuance and grace with which McCraney surfaces and embodies these divergent tonalities serve to underscore just how remarkable Smith's turns as Joan were.

Beautifully, we get to hear from Smith himself in the performance's final moments. Now in his sixties, he appears via video and offers reflections on the kinds of transformations he hoped Joan would help him engender and achieve. Though time and the destructive societal forces that he fought so vigorously against throughout his life have robbed him of some of his vim—and, indeed, many of his co-conspirators—he remains optimistic that another kind of world is still possible. The performance, his presence on screen reminds, is not a memorial. Joan remains very much alive in Smith, and the work she helped start remains ongoing.

As the lights come up, jolting us out of darkness, and as the volume of the music increases, there is a message that continues to reverberate loudly: Make change! After all, as *Ms. Blakk for President* powerfully demonstrates: An Army of Lovers Cannot Lose.

## NOTES

1. The full description posted to the Steppenwolf website read: “Meet America’s first drag queen presidential candidate—Ms. Joan Jett Blakk—as she announces her bid to run for President of the United States. It’s Chicago, 1992, and with the AIDS crisis at its height, Joan and the newly formed Queer Nation Chicago have an urgent agenda. Joan sets off on an exhilarating and dangerous journey to drag queer politics out of the closet and into a future where ALL are visible and ALL have a place at the table. Inspired—but not bound by true events, *MS. BLAKK FOR PRESIDENT* takes us into the heart and mind of one of Chicago’s most singular and radical citizens. Infused with music and hilarity, *MS. BLAKK* is part campaign rally, part nightclub performance, part confessional—and all party!” See <https://www.steppenwolf.org/tickets--events/seasons/2018-19/ms-blakk/>.

2. Here I gesture toward the theorizations of “image events” by scholar Kevin Michael DeLuca. See Kevin Michael DeLuca, “Unruly Arguments: The Body Rhetoric of Earth First!, ACT UP, and Queer Nation,” *Argumentation and Advocacy* 36 (Summer 1999): 9–21.

3. Anonymous, “Queers Read This!/I Hate Straights!” New York: n.p., 1990.

4. See, Olivia Clement, “Steppenwolf Adds Tarell Alvin McCraney and Tina Landau’s *Ms. Blakk for President* to 2019 Season,” *Playbill.com*, September 13, 2018, <http://www.playbill.com/article/steppenwolf-adds-tarell-alvin-mccraney-and-tina-landaus-ms-blakk-for-president-to-2019-season>.

5. Joe E. Jeffreys, “Joan Jett Blakk for President: Cross-Dressing at the Democratic National Convention,” *TDR*, Vol. 37. No. 3 (Autumn 1993): 186–195.

6. *Ibid.*, 186.

7. *Ibid.*, 192.

8. See, *Lick Bush in '92*, Directed by Gabriel Gomez and Elspeth kydd, 1993.

9. Thanks to the efforts of Gomez, kydd, Smith, and others, The Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture now houses the Joan Jett Blakk/Lick Bush in '92 archive, 1991–1996, where anyone can explore more about Smith and Ms. Joan Jett Blakk’s pioneering campaigns and activism.

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