Deep Roots
Playwright Antoinette Nwandu confronts race, religion, and her personal history.
by Olivia Schwob

Antoinette Nwandu ’02 has a lot to say. Dressed for battle in the Brooklyn writer’s uniform—sunglasses, leather jacket, boots that clip the pavement—she walks as she talks, unimpressed by uncharted destinations.

Exploratory dialogue is the métier of any good playwright, and Nwandu is very good. Her break-out hit, Pass Over, was hailed for its linguistic signature: languid volleys and rapid-fire wordplay, straddling black vernacular, Beckettian deconstruction, and Biblical prophecy. A reinterpretation of Waiting for Godot for the era of Michael Brown and Trayvon Martin, the play centers on two young black men who pass their days and nights pinned—by metaphysics, fate, or oppressive social structures—to a street corner. Then tragedy strikes.

During an afternoon hour, Nwandu’s own speech will jump from Beckett to the Kardashians, from church pews to Soul Cycle, from Toni Morrison to the Goonies. She’ll plumb her own history and aspirations, and the core of her artistic mission, even as she reflects on why Instagram makes her so uncomfortable. She is a master bridge-builder between high and low art—or, more to the point, she makes an art of rejecting the distinction.

Although she says, “Change is very slow for me,” it becomes clear, as she begins to
describe her current projects, that some kinds of change have come on quite suddenly. “Nothing, nothing, nothing, nothing, and then a few things at once,” is how she describes her career trajectory so far.

The “few things” include a screenplay for Amazon Studios, an adaptation of Nafissa Thompson-Spires’s short story “Wash Clean the Bones.” As Nwandu’s first paid studio-writing job, the project has meant learning the industry ropes, on top of adjusting from the stage to the screen. She has another screenplay in the works, as well as a TV show in development with Annapurna Pictures, both in the early stages. And then there are the plays: yet another commission, this one for “a fairly large institution” in the theater world. Meanwhile, she is working through rewrites of her newest play, Tavalu or The Saddest Song, for its forthcoming premiere at Manhattan’s Vineyard Theater.

Graduating from New York University’s Tisch School of the Arts with an M.F.A. in playwriting on the brink of the 2008 financial crisis was her stark awakening to the economic realities of theater; Pass Over marked the light at the end of a long tunnel. The play was first performed in 2017 by Chicago’s Steppenwolf Theatre Company and ignited some controversy and excitement. It earned a second run, at Lincoln Center, and a New York Times review that said, “The play is a work of great force and subtlety. It marks the light at the end of a long tunnel.”

Nwandu now considers a cult. She speaks frankly about the aftershocks of her upbringing. (She grew up in Los Angeles in the 1980s, raised by a single mother in a fundamentalist Baptist church that Nwandu now considers a cult. She speaks frankly about the aftershocks of her upbringing. Theater was nonexistent; television and movies were tightly controlled. The process of coming to the theater—at Harvard as an English concentrator and beyond—coincided with eradicating the authoritarian voices that had filled her head.

Looking back, she describes her earlier school years that was so memorable and implicitly historical contained a series of comparisons on facing pages of towns in England and New England that bore the same names. Thus there were photos with comment on the towns of Bedford, Devon, and Biddeford, Maine; of Bath, Somerset, and Bath, Maine; of Portsmouth, Hampshire, and Portsmouth, New Hampshire; of Newhaven, Sussex, and New Haven, Connecticut; and of Hartford, Hartfordshire, and my own town, Hartford, Connecticut. It was

Harvard University citizens. Illuminating History: A Retrospective of Seven Decades (W.W. Norton, $28.95) contains five of his razor-sharp portraits of “small, strange, obscure, but illuminating documents or individuals,” extending from each “datum” to “its meaning for the world at large.” Harvardians may value even more having the texts of his Memorial Minutes for fellow giants Samuel Eliot Morison and Oscar Handlin (see The College Pump, page 64). Historians will value his epilogue on his scholarship, “The Elusive Past.” All readers will cherish the unusually warm, personal introduction, “Entering the Past,” from which this excerpt comes—explaining an education that "began in an addiction I had somehow acquired to reading."

My parents were complicit in this addiction, and they had an expert to advise them. Hartford’s biggest and best bookstore, which once had sold books to Mark Twain, was then owned by a friend of theirs, Israel Witkower, an émigré from Vienna.

He knew about books of all kinds, in several languages, and visiting his store, with its deep central corridor crowded with books, its alcoves, and its jumbled bargain basement, was an adventure. . . . History was of no special interest, but I recall two books . . . that I read before high school and that I later realized were historical in essence. I read and reread them, and I never forgot them. One was a big coffee-table book with a deeply embossed purple cover, published, I think by the Collier’s magazine company, largely consisting of close-up photos of the great men and events of the early twentieth century. The pages were printed in the brownish, “rotogravure” process, but to me they were vivid, and the commentary was readable. The faces of the presidents and other celebrities were intriguing. But it was the battle scenes of World War I that mainly gripped my imagination. . . . The comments were innocuous, but the scenes were fearful and unforgettable.

The other book of those pre-high-school years that was so memorable and implicitly historical contained a series of comparisons on facing pages of towns in England and New England that bore the same names. Thus there were photos with comment on the towns of Bedford, Devon, and Biddeford, Maine; of Bath, Somerset, and Bath, Maine; of Portsmouth, Hampshire, and Portsmouth, New Hampshire; of Newhaven, Sussex, and New Haven, Connecticut; and of Hartford, Hartfordshire, and my own town, Hartford, Connecticut. It was
work, including Pass Over and its predecessor, Breach, as attempts to use theater as “therapy.” (Breach presents a young writer-teacher trapped between competing expectations and struggling to forge her own identity.) She stands by those plays, and the version of herself who wrote them, but now sees them as “masochistic” at the root, she says. “I’ll never hurt myself to make art again.”

But Nwandu's childhood also bequeathed her artistic instincts: the theatrics of the church, the particularities of her family dynamic, and the ideas of '80s popular television. And she remains interested in autobiography, if not in reopening old wounds: the protagonist in Tuvalu is a black woman looking back on her adolescence in Los Angeles, amid the O.J. Simpson trial and violence in her own home. Now, Nwandu says, the challenge is to marshal those elements to leave the audience with something more than a reiteration of pain.

The current political moment sharpens the urgency of that challenge. Living through what she calls “the day-by-day formation of a fascist state” has given her a new mission: to build community through storytelling and create a space to heal. For Nwandu, television, especially in the era of streaming, presents an unparalleled opportunity to experiment and to speak to a diverse America that exists nowhere in physical space. “I’m not asking people to forget their hatred as a way of glossing over it, but to engage with their hatred as a way of letting it go.”

But for transformative emotional journeys through storytelling, Nwandu believes theater remains the place where it’s truly possible for humans to really connect. In her words: “We are meat packets who need to sit next to other meat packets sometimes, at a very basic level.”

In Tuvalu, Nwandu meditates on the notion of apocalypse. What happens after the worst happens? What new kinds of relationships and realities become possible in the wake of true disaster? But for the moment, in the midst of intensive rewrites, she can’t be much more specific than that. “I just don’t want to pin it down yet, even for myself.”

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Hot Pursuits
Bassist Matthew Berlin
by Lydialyce Gibson

Matthew Berlin ’89, a jazz and blues bassist who also knocks around in folk, ragtime, and classical and performs sometimes three or four nights a week, is quick to tell people that he’s not a real musician. “A hack,” he insists, half-kidding. His regular job is as a trust and estates lawyer in a Boston firm. But the truth is, he’s been a musician—a serious one—longer than he’s been anything else. “It’s just always been there,” he says.

That comes through in his most recent project, a jazz album released this year: I Just Want to Be Horizontal. Berlin produced it and played bass; the album is a collaboration with two of his oldest friends and bandmates: singer Samoa Wilson and the legendary folk guitarist Jim Kweskin (whose eponymous 1960s jug band attracted imitators including the Grateful Dead and the Nitty Gritty Dirt Band; for this album, Kweskin gathered a nine-piece jazz ensemble). The album takes its title, and its inspiration, from the music of swing pianist Teddy Wilson (no relation to Samoa), who ran a studio band in Kansas City during the 1920s and ‘30s and played with jazz greats Benny Goodman, Lena Horne, Louis Armstrong, Ella Fitzgerald, and Billie Holiday. “His band was incredibly tight,” Berlin says. “The feel was that they were swinging so hard, and it just was so effortless and clean and dignified and cool.”

That’s a feeling the album tries to replicate: the way the piano intro to a song like “Lover Come Back” opens up into a winsome, easy swing; the way the guitar and bass take their time soaking into the notes of the title track, “I Want to Be Horizontal”—a 1934 jazz ballad transformed here into a modern blues—while Wilson’s voice glides across the melody. Many of the album’s songs were recorded by Teddy Wilson’s band; Berlin and Kweskin made a point of unearthing old verses, lost in the intervening decades, even as they updated some of the arrangements.

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Photograph by Stu Rosner