

THE BIG IDEA

A short satire of epic proportions

by Colman Domingo

A Theater.

Lights up on an actor. The actor is dressed in a tuxedo. The actor is very likeable. Sort of a hybrid of Bill Cosby and the Pine Sol Lady. There is an ensemble of actors on stage. They are dressed in street clothes.

ACTOR

Good evening ladies and gentlemen! Tonight's performance of Ain't Doin' Nothin', The Fats Waller Negro Feel Good Black and Bluesy Musical, has been cancelled!

ENSEMBLE

Awwwww!!!

ACTOR

But tonight we bring you a simple piece of theater to celebrate the new nation. Can I get a YES WE CAN!

ENSEMBLE

YES WE CAN!!!

ACTOR

In honor of our NEW NATION we the entire African American Acting community in San Francisco who actually live on the outskirts of Hayward, Fremont, and Richmond!

ENSEMBLE 1

Don't forget me...I have been pushed out to Novato!

ACTOR

I didn't know we made it over to the North Bay?

ENSEMBLE 1

I was pushed OUT of the East Bay!

ALL

Damn!

ACTOR

Pardon our "French" but as you might guess a damn is an appropriate use of language when it comes to discussing...

ALL

THE CHANGING DEMOGRAPHICS OF SAN FRANCISCO AND HOW IT AFFECTS ARTIST AND AUDIENCES ALIKE! (Applause)

Aretha Frankin's "Rock Steady" is pumped out on the speakers.

ACTOR

That's right. Ladies and Gentlemen. Sit back and relax. Tonight we bring you for one night only a special treat from the "American Liberal Left Make Us Feel Good About Being Progressive On the Outside But Not Really and Truly On the Inside" Theater of the Bay Area. Now I hear some grumbles and I feel you getting a little nervous as you reach for your Pashmina. This I promise you will not be political. I know under ordinary circumstances in the world that a person of my persuasion would be an intimidation here in the dark with just a small spot of light on my face. But remember, we cast colorblind here so my darkness is a non-issue, right? Please allow us, your limited number of African American Actors of San Francisco who FINALLY have come together in one stage production, to have a few words.

Curtain rises to reveal a large Video Screen. The ensemble surrounds. Applause. There are Three Artistic Directors bound and gagged. Gags are removed. The music cuts out. All of a sudden they are all standing on chairs, clinking wine glasses, making announcement and statements. They are in full opening night excitement!

ARTISTIC DIRECTOR 1

I have always supported black actors and artists. Let the record show. Always one show devoted to the plight of people of color.

ARTISTIC DIRECTOR 2

I do a few! I always have an Asian American or Latino play. What do you want from me? I operate a 20 million dollar non-profit institution in the Bay Area that has thousands of loyal wonderful subscribers.

ARTSTIC DIRECTOR 3

My subscribers always allow me ONE Black show a year. Usually an August Wilson! I know I don't have one single African American in a high level artistic, management, education, advisory or executive board position.

ARTISTIC DIRECTOR 2

We have about 3 black subscribers, They just don't go to the theater! What am I supposed to do? We market to the churches! (Gag is placed over mouth)

ARTISTIC DIRECTOR 3

But you know how conservative those churches are! You know who was the most outspoken when it came to...(Gag is placed over mouth)

ARTISTIC DIRECTOR 1

Weren't you in my colorblind casting of "A Raisin in the..." (Gag is placed over mouth)

ACTOR

Now no need to cause a fuss.

(Ensemble all pull out AK47's)

ACTOR

We ain't mad atcha. We just need a little help. My pastor would always say. You cannot do it alone! Can I get an amen?

ALL

(In the tone of the "AHHHmeHHnnn" in The Color Purple Musical) AMEN!!!

ACTOR

Now remember, there is no cause for alarm. You know us very well. (Actors stand forward)
Marlo Call, J. Michael Cauldron, Eliza Charter, R Kelly Wright and Aldo Billingslea.

ALDO

Why did you give my real name?

ACTOR

You are the only voice brave enough to testify. Besides you are just so...tall...and exceptionally...well gifted....

ALDO

True. Go on. Go on.

ACTOR

This is your African American Acting Community of San Francisco and the Bay Area. We are the last of a dying breed. Actors who actually try to hang in there in a city that is not made for us. As I am sure you are unaware in your "everything is cool and groovy that this city built on the left and patchouli" is not becoming, but has become, Caucasian-cisco, or LILYWHITE BY THE BAY!"

ENSEMBLE

Gasp!

ACTOR

Yes, I said it. Nothing supports the reason why we should still be here. Besides the opportunity to do a revival of an August Wilson play or play Calaban.

J MICHAEL

Which I played to thunderous rousing applause! We are becoming extinct like a Latin family in the Mission District. We are not certain about how it happened we just know that we are increasingly becoming invisible in the Bay Area but in particular in San Francisco. I am not talking unseen I am talking invisible. People actually look right through us! There used to be a time when our blackness helped us to stand out. But because our liberal left has such strong feelings about not seeing color. We are virtually invisible. Except when...

Ensemble prepares

J. MICHAEL

Prop 8 passed.

MARLO
That is some bullshit.

R. KELLY
What the fuck?

MARLO
All I know is that they better not try to blame us?

ALDO
You know somehow they will.

MARLO
Not on this one.

Artistic Directors play Television Reporters on video.

ARTISTIC DIRECTOR 3
African Americans torpedoed Proposition 8. Blame the African American churches, the same folks that voted for our nation's first black president are the same who voted on this horrific civil rights issue of Gay Marriage. This is FOX News!

ENSEMBLE
Gasp!

ARTISTIC DIRECTOR 1
The leader of unbiased truth!

ARTISTIC DIRECTOR 2
Okay??

ENSEMBLE
Gasp!

MARLO
Ungh Ungh! The last census I checked, African Americans only made up 6.7% of the State of California and only 7.2% of the City of San Francisco, This is some bullshit! We ain't torpedoing jack!

ALDO
And...Scene! (Points and locks AK47 at subscriber trying to leave) Now they see me.

ACTOR

Any impressions from that scene? Any? Why so quiet? This is San Francisco a place where people are supposed to speak up and out! Well I will continue. We need a little help and you can be a part of it. We need You-- The Subscriber-- to demand To Get the Black People Back in San Francisco. This is good for you and me!

SUBSCRIBER 1 (*played by the same actor as the Artistic Director 1*)

How can we get the black people back in San Francisco? I am one good-hearted liberal. I was a radical in the 60's and I am dedicated to doing the right thing as long as that is what will bring in the money.

ACTOR

I would like to take a quote from Rhodessa Jones. Can I get a Yes We Can?

ENSEMBLE

YES WE CAN!!!

ACTOR

"Politics doesn't work, Religion is too eclectic, but Art, Art just might be the parachute that saves us all!"

ENSEMBLE

Yes we will.

SUBSCRIBER 2 (*played by same actor as the Artistic Director 2*)

You want us to help save us all?

ACTOR

Yes! And why? Because I know for years you are only and have only been concerned with saving yourself. The numbers prove it. Video please.

The video shows the Artistic Director 3 dressed as Lil' Bo Peep!

ARTISTIC DIRECTOR 3

Now ya'll know that you demand from me year after year British imports, Broadway, Television, Film and any 3rd rate star that I can get my hands on. To be fair you do ask me to present works that examine the human heart. But as our grants and support from the community show we can only support maybe one heart from the black community a year. You ask for it! I give it to you!

ELIZA

Wait. Why is that person wearing a Lil' Bo Peep get-up?

ACTOR

It is just a device I am using to show the ridiculous nature of this issue and how to deal with it.

MARLO

But you were given a grant, black person, to discuss this issue and help us pursue a forum.

ACTOR

But you know. I don't even live here anymore. I am trying to just present a satire to get people to think about where they live and how it has changed drastically and if they don't do something about it, the very city that they have prided themselves on is not that city anymore. I am trying to help.

ARTISTIC DIRECTOR 1

Colman, what are you trying to say really? You live most of the time in New York and you have benefited from your artistic life in San Francisco.

ACTOR WHO IS NOW COLMAN

I know but it is complicated. I moved to New York because I got tired of being such a minority! Don't you ever want to be a part of a community that has more folks that look like you? You are intrinsically understood. I couldn't afford to live here anymore. I was losing. I was becoming so neutral. Theater was losing its color. I wanted to stay here but there was a mass exodus during the dot-com boom and self-implosion. And not just from African American Artists. We were all getting pushed out! There are so many yuppies running rampant all over this town and they are bringing their Connecticut culture and demanding it in theater too! They are the donors now. They are the young donors that theater goes after. They have it and they are dictating. Trust me. I lived in the Mission and I moved there because I thought I found my place to thrive. I don't know what is so great about living in the Bay Area anymore? I just know that this topic is so complicated and I think that the artist has to take a stand. It is actually political. This city has become less diverse and I think that is a huge loss. What will the next black boy from inner city America look to as a place to thrive and a city that will support his growth as an artist?

ALDO

But your "play" is a mess! AK47's, Restoration Comedy, Fats Waller, Aretha Franklin, and three white people?

COLMAN

It's META-THEATRICAL! It is a progressive way that I am using to try and deal with difficult issues. Okay...maybe it is a mess but so is this issue. That's what I am trying to say. It's a hot mess. And I think this is the only way to address it. Getting all Meta all up in here! And this should galvanize this community like Prop 8 has galvanized the gay community! In my heart it is as important but no one sees it as such. Everyday there was a new expensive restaurant, a new loft, a new way of thinking storming the city like a rhinoceros in an Ionesco play! The demographics have changed drastically in the Bay Area and more importantly San Francisco.

MARLO

Colman I am with you. We, not only the artist, but the government, the theater owners, the collectives, need to come together to keep the promise of San Francisco and the Bay Area alive. Just like those in the past. We need some arts activists akin to revolutionaries such as the Black Panthers, Harvey Milk, and Angela Davis! To fight for our collective livelihood!

COLMAN

I would like to end this play with a short statement from Bay Area actor Aldo Billingslea. I asked my peers to step in and respond to this question. Aldo was the only one that took the time to answer my call. I know folks get busy but come on, just like I point out, do people including many of Bay Area citizens take this issue to heart. Enough to stand up and speak out!? To just

engage in a discussion that will move into action. To ask the Artistic Directors to think about it! To ask the community to think about it! To ask the politicians to think about it! To make room for it! San Francisco and the Bay Area are increasingly becoming more conservative and colorless and I think that is a great loss to its Grateful Dead, Fillmore, Free Love, Hippy, All Inclusive Proactive Past Promise. Aldo?

ALDO

There are several great things about Bay Area theatre: lots of great theatres – probably the only city in the country (outside of NYC) with six LORT theatres! We've got a wide range of audiences, including some intelligent, very theatre savvy audiences.

In this hotbed of theatre, as an African American you are afforded the best and the worst of the mix, but the pivot point is most often the artistic directors. There are some directors who can see that in some situations race is not a relevant issue and will cast actors to suit roles, some directors who know that to cast a black actor in a role initially conceived for a white actor will raise the stakes in a play, and some directors who know that in slotting a show written for black actors, their audience will grow in spirit and in numbers from the experience.

The Drags...

Drag number one – there are only a few individual directors who realize all three scenarios.

Drag number two – directors don't stay in one place forever. There are very few other classically trained African American actors in the area to compete for roles so the phone often only rings when theatres are looking to do their one (1) single, sole, solitary black, ethnic, non-European, sometimes LGBT, possibly disability-based play.

Drag number three – there are very few other classically trained African American actors in the area so theatres simply avoid shows that might be difficult to cast.

Drag number four– good classically trained African American actors in the area that find it difficult to make a living or get steady work know that there could be steadier work in larger more lucrative markets, so after having some success, they bolt to Los Angeles and New York. For example you, Colman, oh and Anika Noni Rose, Peter Macon, June Lomena, Benton Greene, etc.

Drag number five– if a theatre slots a show that requires African American actors with language skills, i.e. August Wilson, and hires actors from out of town so that the local African American actor doesn't get that phone call... it hurts like a “mutha” and prompts actors to consider looking for work in larger more lucrative markets.

So basically, it's “crumbs from the table of joy”. The theatres are too strapped and they fight for crumbs, which leaves not enough work for qualified artists, including African American artists, so we are left to fight for crumbs of crumbs. But, I'm here so I'll just wait 'em out! And in the meantime enjoy the theatres that appreciate what I bring because of my race and/or regardless of it!

As August Wilson says, “If you live long enough the boat will turn around. Big boats turn slow, but they turn nevertheless.”

ACTOR

I would like to add. But WE HAVE TO PUSH THAT BOAT! Can I get a YES WE CAN?

ENSEMBLE

I HOPE WE CAN!

Blackout

THE BEGINNING

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