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Antoinette Nwandu and Graham Schmidt. Photo courtesy of Graham Schmidt.

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## Theatre in Black and White: Antoinette Nwandu & Graham Schmidt

Married theatremakers talk about what they took home from 'Fairview,' 'Slave Play,' and 'What to Send Up When It Goes Down.'

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**BY ANTOINETTE NWANDU, GRAHAM SCHMIDT**

From the time **Antoinette Nwandu** and **Graham Schmidt** were engaged on March 12, 2018, until their wedding on May 26, 2019, the couple saw four plays that shone a light on their different experiences in life and at the theatre. Nwandu, a Black playwright and screenwriter, and Schmidt, a white director and Brooklyn College professor, saw *Fairview* by Jackie Sibblies-Drury, *What to Send Up When It Goes Down* by Aleshea Harris, *Slave Play* by Jeremy O. Harris, and Nwandu's own *Pass Over*. All four plays pointedly put uncomfortable questions about race front and center, and consequently opened up a conversation between Nwandu and Schmidt.

It's a conversation that is ongoing, as the following dialogue—edited from a transcript originally published by [Page by Page](#)—amply reflects.

**Graham Schmidt:** Almost from the day we met, you and I have loved consuming art together. [We met in July 2016 at [PlayPenn](#).] We go to galleries, museums, see dance, read poetry together, or just explore the world.

**Antoinette Nwandu:** But since we were preparing to make this lifelong commitment, the stakes of our art-consuming, and our art-making, for that matter, all of a sudden went *way the fuck up*.

**Schmidt:** Right. And so these plays were not only works of art that we enjoyed consuming on their own merits—

**Nwandu:** They're enshrined in our relationship journey.

**Schmidt:** Exactly. They're touchstones for when we talk about race, sex...

**Nwandu:** Gender, power dynamics. And of course, they're also touchstones for when we have conversations about craft, genre, voice, how to tell a story. These productions are masterworks.

**Schmidt:** Absolutely. So we'll try, going play by play, to take ourselves back to our experience as audience members together. And we'll give some context around what we were experiencing and the conversations these plays sparked for us.

**Nwandu:** We saw the original production of *Fairview* at Soho Rep, directed by Sarah Benson. For me, the headline for this experience was that *Fairview* gave me an opportunity to see you, Graham, respond to being called out as a white person. The world is always naming my Blackness, calling on me as a Black person and a Black woman, but at *Fairview* there was a sense of, “Hey, white person, you have to do some work.” We’d been together for two years at that point, we’re in an intimate relationship, but because of the way that whiteness works, you’re rarely identified as “white.” You’re just a “guy.” That play created for me one of the few occasions where you were overtly raced as white in a public space.

**Schmidt:** Which is something that happened several times at the theatre over the course of the next seven months—

**Nwandu:** True.

**Schmidt:** I remember this day: You were getting ready to open *Pass Over* at Lincoln Center, and you were being profiled by *The New York Times*.

**Nwandu:** Yes, I had my first *New York Times* profile interview earlier that day.

**Schmidt:** And I remember it was a little bit charged between us...

**Nwandu:** I was late for our date because I spent too long talking about myself with *The New York Times*.

**Schmidt:** And I was totally pouty about it! So we meet up for dinner and then we go see *Fairview* and we’re sitting next to each other. Actually, I remember, it was about a quarter of the way through, I remember thinking: Oh, this is cool and fun, and being seduced by the sitcom nature of the world onstage.

**Nwandu:** The way Jackie and Sarah set up this super regular-degular reality, it was almost surreal. I remember you loved the “I’m Hungry and I’m Clean” dance, it was probably then—

**Schmidt:** Yeah! That choreography by Raja Feather Kelly that MaYaa Boateng performed—

**Nwandu:** She’s so amazing.

**Schmidt:** So amazing. But at a certain point, the voices of these aggressively white and privileged people who are consuming the play come on, and then they physically enter the world of the play. One character wore a backwards hat, sports jersey, chains—

**Nwandu:** They were suggesting a certain suburban white boy performance of quote-unquote urban stylings that you—

**Schmidt:** Right. I dress like that, in some ways. I wear a flat-brimmed hat. As a white person that grew up in the suburbs, I consumed Black art and culture and didn't think about the predatory nature of that consumption. Then the caricature went deeper as this guy obviously took up space, performed Blackness in ways that cut close to the bone for me. I've definitely taken up space in that way, and I've *definitely* condescended like that, just being oblivious of my whiteness.

**Nwandu:** So you identified with that behavior.

**Schmidt:** Yes, 100 percent. I thought: Damn, Jackie's been watching me, people like me. An entire running theme of the season became the difficulty of seeing myself as a caricature. And that happened several times.

**Nwandu:** Yes, the flattening of a white character, one of my favorite tools in ye olde tool bag!

**Schmidt:** That season I thought more and more of myself as somebody who, in an uncomfortable way, fits into these caricatures more than I'd like. Theatre has helped flip that switch multiple times.

**Nwandu:** Yeah...I'd never want us as human beings to *only* relegate each other to stereotypes, but it's useful to see how others see you, how they interpret your behavior for themselves, where it's like, Oh, wow, this is how I look to them.

**Schmidt:** Totally. Another question that's been in the air has been, who is this play for? Because the play doesn't seem to work unless there are white people in the audience.

**Nwandu:** Right. And does that mean it's *for* white people? Is that, instead of it's being for Black people?



MaYaa Boateng in "Fairview" at Soho Rep. (Photo by Julieta Cervantes)

**Schmidt:** The iconic moment from *Fairview* is when the teenaged daughter character breaks the fourth wall and asks the white audience members to take the stage, trading places with the performers. I remember you wept when that happened. I'm curious what was happening for you in that moment.

**Nwandu:** Well, partly because we had been in a fight earlier and I was having an emotion dump. But I also felt a lot of empathy for MaYaa and how she was way out on a limb. I thought, what if white people don't want to go onstage? But you did, so...

**Schmidt:** I think that people waited some nights.

**Nwandu:** Some nights, yes, exactly, and I heard stories about other productions where white people got angry and refused to come onstage. It strikes me that *Fairview* calls upon that young actress to do the most emotional labor in that moment. Like, in order to teach white people, we have to potentially reinscribe trauma on Black people. On the youngest Black girl, of course. I thought, Oh God, I would hate to be that actress right now!

But then I saw my husband—well, at the time my fiancé—going up and being obedient and doing the thing that actress needed and that made me tear up. I thought, I am so uncomfortable for this young girl because she is having to make or break this play right

It brought back memories of an experience I know very well as the articulate, young, dark-skinned Black girl in the room who's having to make something work. But then you help her by rushing up and I was grateful to you in that moment. That's where the tears came from. You, with your maleness and your whiteness, and you're a big guy and people notice you—you helped her. I saw other people getting up because you had gotten up, and so I thought, Okay. Good.

**Schmidt:** Okay, wow. So to put a fine point on this: What does that mean for our question about who that play was for?

**Nwandu:** In that moment it was for both of us in different ways. And in my process—I don't want to sound too churchy, but Jesus said, "Those who have ears to hear, let them hear."

**Schmidt:** So that brings me to a question for you: You're a writer who has written a play over many years and then, when it's produced, you've been confronted by the relentless whiteness of the audience that will consume it. How do you manage that? I remember in Chicago [where *Pass Over* had its world premiere at Steppenwolf], we talked about this a lot. As someone who's sat in that chair, how do you reckon with the politics of who your play is for?

**Nwandu:** On one hand I'm a pragmatist. I know that the audience will be mostly white, and if we're going to get Black people in the audience, we will have to do some work. Of course, there are Black people who come to the theatre on their own all the time, and I don't want to erase them. But at a mainstream theatre, to have a significant stream of Black audience members, some effort will have to be made. But I'm also mindful that just because I'm Black and I'm writing something, not every Black person is going to receive it as being for them. I'm writing it for the people who are here to hear it. If you have ears to hear, you will hear. And if you don't, then, you know, go see something else.

**Schmidt:** That's so interesting. I know we have to move on to the next play, but I do just want to say, there's an interesting dynamic that occurs where a play can directly address a white audience, as *Fairview* or *Pass Over* did.

**Nwandu:** Right. Just because a play addresses white people doesn't mean it's only for white people.

**Schmidt:** Because I remember seeing Black audience members at *Pass Over* coming to the show multiple times, bringing their children and families, and part of the reason was you spoke on their behalf.

**Nwandu:** They're there to witness what's happening, they're part of it. Exactly. And I think that's a great segue into Aleshea Harris' *What to Send Up When It Goes Down*.



The cast of "What to Send Up When It Goes Down" in the New York premiere production by Movement Theatre Company at A.R.T./New York Theatres, directed by Whitney White. (Photo by Ahron R. Foster)

**Schmidt:** I remember *What to Send Up When It Goes Down* started a major fight. I think we've also discovered as a couple that fighting is not bad...

**Nwandu:** I'm getting you there! You're discovering that fighting isn't bad, and I'm discovering how to fight with kindness instead of knives.

**Schmidt:** Which tends to make it not so bad!

**Nwandu:** Funny how *that* works.

**Schmidt:** So what we were discovering when we saw *What to Send Up* was—

**Nwandu:** Some people have described it as a choreopoem.

**Schmidt:** Yes, Helen Shaw nailed it [when she said](#) it was as if a choreopoem were stretched over a drumhead. It had this tightness, this energy.

**Nwandu:** I love that.

**Schmidt:** When you arrive at the theatre space, the lobby is covered with the images of young Black people who have been murdered.

**Nwandu:** And so it's already a space of mourning, a space of remembrance—a curated space for the remembrance of Black lives and Black people. The way the performance started was so meaningful. It felt as if Aleshea was sanctifying the space.

**Schmidt:** Say more.

**Nwandu:** *What to Send Up* is a play but it's also a ritual of mourning with this history of being staged in high schools and people's houses. So the genesis is this performance that's also a ritual aimed at true healing within the Black community. The pre-performance speech protects that part of the ritual. It says to white people, "Hey, you're not just here to see some random-ass play, but we are allowing you as a guest to witness this space of Black solidarity, mourning, remembrance, joy, on certain conditions." And that answers so many questions for Black audience members. *Am I gonna laugh out loud or not? Am I gonna be able to talk back to the characters or not? Am I gonna be able to 'mm' and 'ahh' or not?* There's one culture for whom that's fine, and another culture for whom it's like, shut up. But immediately we know it's a space that white people don't own.

**Schmidt:** One searing memory I have from this show—and I should note that this is the only show we saw on separate nights—

**Nwandu:** Right.

**Schmidt:** —but I happened to recognize a lot of people from the theatre community there. At the top of the show, there was some participation stuff that I sometimes find really ho but this was quite affecting. A performer asked a series of questions about audience

members' encounters with micro-aggressions, outright violence, and state violence. She asked everybody to signal if they'd been threatened by a police officer, and one artist who won't name—but whom everyone would recognize—stepped forward. It was low-key shocking to me because to see somebody who was—

**Nwandu:** Erudite, academic—

**Schmidt:** Yes, but also somebody who had achieved a level of success that you'd think would insulate him from any harassment. I feel stupidly naïve saying this, but I was surprised and immediately struck by the fact that this person is *still* the object of hate and violence because he's Black. That really set the stakes for me, and while I knew the show wasn't *for me*, I felt how sacred and weighted the role of witness would be. I also remember feeling very uncomfortable during that performance.

I hate the word “woke” and I don't describe myself that way; it's only a pejorative term. I do think of myself as somebody who thinks deeply about race, wrestles with it. But there was such anger in that production, and much of it was directed at bodies like mine. And I didn't feel as if I could or should escape whatever judgment was being rendered, if that makes sense. Once again, just engaging with the flattening of my personality to whiteness was really hard. And that was an experience—much more so than *Fairview*—that made me feel uncomfortable.

**Nwandu:** What I hear you saying is that while *What to Send Up* and *Fairview* both create overt relationships with whiteness, the experience of being told “this is not for or about you” was actually a lot less comfortable than the experience of being called upon to go onstage.

**Schmidt:** Totally. Yes.

**Nwandu:** So it's the intentional focus—the idea that you can be here but this is not for you.

**Schmidt:** It's not even designed to enlighten me. During *Fairview* I had a job, I did some labor and I looked around and I saw my fellow white people, and I felt like, we were onstage and we'd done something low-key admirable.

**Nwandu:** And that was a lot more comfortable than the “this is not for you” at *What to Send Up*.

**Schmidt:** Right. I was aware that my experience was not central at all. Like, that's not what the play was trying to do—

**Nwandu:** Your experience was incidental.

**Schmidt:** Yeah.

**Nwandu:** That's pretty pivotal.

**Schmidt:** And so much theatre that I experience—you know, I'm someone who has this expertise in Chekhov, I studied Russian and I lived in Moscow. I love Shakespeare and Miller, and I came of age in a literature department where I was the primary audience. And my experience was *the one that mattered*. This experience was different in a really important way. And when I think about the staging and how uncomfortable I was in *What to Send Up*—and there were so many searing jokes and jabs about whiteness happening—I think there was something powerful about watching other white people take those jokes. I don't know if I'm centering my experience again—

**Nwandu:** It can be important for you without needing to be important for the play. In a space that was not yours, that you didn't own, and in which you're not centered, you're uncomfortable while watching other white people be uncomfortable. I think that might speak to why [director] Whitney [White] staged it in the round—

**Schmidt:** Totally, yes.

**Nwandu:** And I think that's an interesting link to what Robert O'Hara and Jeremy O. Harris did with *Slave Play*, actually. These are plays for which audience-watching is central. I mean, that mirror is a motherfucker! And it's very racialized. Part of watching that play is watching other people watch that play, watching people watch you watch that play, knowing that you're being watched, knowing that you're never off the hook, witnessing others' emotions, confronting your own discomfort.



*Jeremy O. Harris speaks during a talkback of the Black Out performance of "Slave Play" on Broadway last week. (Photo courtesy of Slave Play on Broadway)*

**Schmidt:** And I did the gross thing that I hear people doing, and now when I hear it I'm like, ugh, gross, which is rather than engage directly with what I felt and the searing discomfort that I had, I was like, Oh, well formally it had some interesting features, some things worked for me, some didn't, I'm just one audience member, etc.

**Nwandu:** You were acting like there was safety in intellectualizing your experience of the play and I got mad because obviously I know you well enough to be like, "Motherfucker, we're not intellectualizing right now! I want to know what you *felt*," but you were like, "Blah blah blah formal techniques."

**Schmidt:** Yes, I did the whole subconscious distancing of myself from my embodied experience and from things that were less comfortable than what I expect to experience when I go to a theatre, and now I hear people doing that and I hate it. I think it was also like the beginning of a realization that us being in a biracial couple is something that we will never resolve—

**Nwandu:** Yeah, we don't have to fix race in America by building a life together. To even remove ourselves from the need to reconcile it and just be truthful observers of it.

**Schmidt:** And at least for me, the deeper I get into it, the more I feel like it's bigger than either of us, the history that we embody, that we inherit, that lives in our bodies—it's something that we can't and don't need to reconcile. We just have these histories laid over the top of our relationship and that can be absolutely infuriating, confusing, and heartbreaking to navigate. But the alternative—turning a blind eye, I guess—is so much worse. These shows helped us find a way to talk about that, even though it's rarely been comfortable.

**Nwandu:** Work work work work work work!

**Schmidt:** Let's go back into our experience of the play, and what we felt watching it.

**Nwandu:** Well, there had been so much chatter about it, and we saw it late in the run, and so I walked into New York Theatre Workshop with my defenses—well, not necessarily up, but like I had read about it in a way that I don't normally. There had already been Twitter drama, which I had followed, so I came in with my antennae up because I had talked to people who'd loved it, people who'd hated it, and I came in knowing I was going to have “an experience,” which ironically protected me from some of the experiences other people had had.

**Schmidt:** I remember watching it and feeling really uncomfortable early on. I knew it was going to be incendiary, and so I was prepared to experience that from a distance, but almost immediately the play got way under my skin. The spectacle of the roleplay put me on the *hard* defensive, and I constructed this wall between myself and the white British guy, Jim, who performed the overseer in this sex therapy session. This was actually, more than with the other plays, where I started thinking, “But I'm not like him.”

**Nwandu:** Whoo! Which is the number one tattle tale! You were telling on yourself!

**Schmidt:** Literally, I was like, “But that's a caricature,” and I think that's an example of being unable to accept that you might embody characters *much* more than you're comfortable with if you're a white person.

**Nwandu:** Yeah, because part of the “beauty” of white privilege is always being an individual. But watching these plays, you're like, Oh, these Black people have my number and the

never even had a conversation with me, because I can be a type. There's parts of me that <sup>+</sup> that type.

**Schmidt:** Yes! So that was tough for me, because I was very aware that I was a well-meaning progressive white guy who was in a relationship with a Black woman. The play really feels like it's pointing at me, and that part of my experience has been excruciating to talk about.

**Nwandu:** Say more.

**Schmidt:** Part of the point of the experience, for me, is to engage the play on its terms, and it's a cautionary tale. Jeremy launches devastating critiques of white people's fragility, self-centeredness, deep narcissism, and he's aiming squarely at progressive white folks. So part of the point is to actively think about identifying with Jim, who's a bit of a monster in the play. Doing that *did* open up conversations about how deeply I listen to you—that's one way *Slave Play* continues to live in our relationship. It also represents what feels to me like a sobering truth that, again, nothing in our relationship exists outside of the traumatic history we've inherited. It's all mixed in there.

**Nwandu:** Absolutely. These plays made me feel anger, rage, gratitude, joy, and also, this deep sense of community. I felt like, "We're gonna be okay. We can withstand so much and still turn out okay." Aleshea, Jackie, Jeremy, they took us to church and the operating room and I'm grateful. I'm really fucking grateful.

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