

Narrative as Performance in Sarah Jones's Bridge and Tunnel: An Autobiographical Solo

السرد من خلال الأداء في مسرحية سارة جونز "جسر ونفق":
عرض فردي للسيرة الذاتية

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This paper investigates narrative as performance in Sarah Jones's Bridge and Tunnel and studies different autobiographical strategies employed in the creation of this solo performance. Bridge and Tunnel (2016) is a one-woman autobiographical Broadway show, in which stage actress Sarah Jones performs a series of character monologues meant to represent a cross section of New York's immigrant population. While personifying the many immigrants of different ages, races, ethnicities, and sexes who meet annually to share their cross-cultural love of poetry, Jones is taking control of her own fate in terms of the stage. Jones prefers to write her own narrative for performance and chooses to base her story on her own life. By investigating the manner in which Jones created her story and performed it, it will be argued that it was not simply her ability to control and own the stage, but a creative process of self-reflection and articulation.

Keywords:

narrative, solo performance, autobiography, ethnicity, immigrants and poetry.

السرد من خلال الأداء في مسرحية سارة جونز "جسر ونفق": عرض فردي للسيرة الذاتية

يقوم هذا البحث بدراسة كيفية استخدام الأداء كوسيلة للسرد في مسرحية جسر ونفق لسارة جونز وكذلك تحليل إستراتيجيات السيرة الذاتية المختلفة المستخدمة في هذا الأداء الفردي المتميز. "جسر ونفق" (٢٠١٦) هو عرض مسرحي فردي عرض في برودواي، حيث تجسد الممثلة سارة جونز بمفردها شخصيات عديده تمثل قطاعا من السكان المهاجرين في نيويورك من مختلف الأعمار، والأعراق والأجناس والذين يجتمعون سنويًا لمشاركة حبهم المتبادل للشعر. وبينما تقوم بأداء تلك الشخصيات المختلفة، تتحكم جونز في مصيرها على المسرح، فهي تأبى إلا أن تعرض قصتها بنفسها من وجهة نظرها الخاصة وترفض أن يقدمها آخرون. ومن خلال تحليل الأداء تتضح قدرة جونز على التحكم الفائق في جسدها وصوتها وتمكنها الهائل من التعبير عن الذات.

NARRATIVE AS PERFORMANCE IN SARAH JONES'S BRIDGE AND TUNNEL: AN AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL SOLO

*To what extent do we self-construct, do we self-invent?
How do we self-identify, and how mutable is that
identity? Like, what if one could be anyone at any
time? Well, my characters, like the ones in my shows,
allow me to play with the spaces between those
questions (Sarah Jones)*

The process of narrative in drama is an increasingly important field of study, since the boundaries of drama have become rather fluid due to the presence of the variety of transmedial and transgeneric phenomena and methods that characterize the cultural production in our time. Consequently, the development of drama and theatre in the second half of the twentieth century witnessed an increased awareness of its narrativity and the initiation of a broad variety of new developments that include improvised forms of performance, and the emergence of a post-dramatic theatre that abandons conventional story-based and character-oriented dramaturgy.

In a 2001 article written on the role of narration in postmodern drama, Brian Richardson contends that "narrative and performance are two of the most widespread and best appreciated cultural forms in our time now, both seem to be everywhere. It is only appropriate that the site in which they are fused together is given the attention it deserves" (*Voice and Narration* 690). Narration has long been an essential feature of the twentieth-century stage where there has been a rapidly increasing narrative-driven or full monological plays especially in the last two-three decades. The form of monodrama has become an example of how the act of narration has developed a shaping influence on the genre itself.

Recently, solo autobiographical performance, which predominantly takes the form of monologue and is mainly about personal experiences, has become phenomenal. Since the 1980s, a genre of solo performance has developed in the United States and beyond, where a huge number of inspiring stories have been presented through solo performances which manage to unlock their power and transform them into our lives. "In the last fifteen years, solo performance and Monologue

Theater has become the fastest growing segment of the world-wide theater community" (Kickstarter 1). One-person shows may be personal, autobiographical creations where, "The use of persona as a means of social critique, the undermining of gender stereotypes through role-play, blurring the outlines of the autobiographical, 'authentic' subject, are recurrent features"(Wallace, *Monologue Theatre...*,13).

This paper tackles the special Tony Award winner one-woman show *Bridge and Tunnel* (2016) written and performed by the African American "master of the genre" playwright and performer Sarah Jones. The playwright explores the diverse immigrant structure of the New York City regions outside Manhattan by playing a variety of different characters, of varying backgrounds regarding age, race, ethnicity, gender and perspective. The play encompasses a series of monologues, in which each character takes the stage during a poetry reading and ends up talking about his or her life. The persona created through Jones's performance is clearly autobiographical, possessed of a defined personality. The paper examines how Jones draws from her own personal life narratives when creating and developing her solo works.

Autobiography is a self-referential-literary subgenre. However, writing an autobiography is a complex process, for the writer becomes "the observing subject and the object of investigation, remembrance, and contemplation"(Smith and Watson1). In his book, *On Autobiography*, Philippe Lejeune defines autobiography as a "retrospective narrative in prose that someone makes of his own existence when he puts the principal accent upon his life, especially upon the story of his own personality"(4)

While *autobiography* is the most widely used and most generally understood term for life narrative, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson in their book, *Reading Autobiography*, argue that,

It is also a term that has been vigorously challenged in the wake of postmodern and postcolonial critiques of the Enlightenment subject. Privileged as the definitive achievement of a mode of life narrative, "autobiography" celebrates the autonomous individual and the universalizing life story. Its theorists have installed this

master narrative of "the sovereign self" as an institution of literature and culture, and identified, in the course of the twentieth century, a canon of representative life narrative. (4)

Contemporary philosophers and cultural critics have argued that identity and experience are "themselves socially constructed, shifting according to historical and cultural ideas about personhood and everyday life"(*Autobiography-Culture and Identity* Para.1). Despite this postmodern turn to thinking about how identity is made, not born, "scholars of autobiography nevertheless insist on the materiality of identity in theorizing life writing, particularly the material consequences of race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, and ability, and how autobiographical narratives are affected by culturally available identity categories and narratives"(*Autobiography-Culture and Identity* Para.1).

Identity and narrative provide key frames through which autobiographers negotiate their life stories. Autobiographies show that "self-life-writing", "is a process that is historically and culturally situated, through which identity and experience are negotiated, materialized, and refashioned" (*Autobiography-Culture and Identity* Para.1). Autobiographies depend on both memory and retrospective techniques to present personal, collective, historical and cultural experiences, through which the author's identity is crystallized and brought to light.

Hala Ibrahim mentions in her article entitled *The Power of Transformation in Denmo Ibrahim's BABA that Solo* performance is a field rife with self-indulgence where many artists draw their resources from themselves. (1) It is a sort of a journey into the self. Ken Bullock argues that solo shows are always, "a dicey proposition ... Sometimes strung midway between Performance Art and, well, monologues of all sorts, including not very theatrical ones, one man, one woman shows often devolve into a kind of live résumé for an actor to be able to show what he can do, between other roles in 'real' plays"(Para.1).

As a result, solo performers are considered storytellers whose stories have a storyline or a plot that expect and demand the active involvement of the audience. As a result, monodrama which is a form of a monologue, "addresses the spectator directly as an accomplice and a

viewer-hearer" and, the monologue theatre, whether solo performance or drama, "plants the self at the heart of the spectacle" (Wallace, *Monologue Theatre*16).

Looking at the how helps examine how meaning is created within a performance context. Catherine McLean-Hopkins in her article "Performing Autologues: Citing/Siting the Self in Autobiographic Performance", examines the characteristics of female autobiography onstage. "Autologue" is a newly coined signifier for the "disclosure of an interior, private world to an exterior, public audience" in the form of monologue that, as this author emphasizes, distinguishes the genre as "a self-narrated performance of the self—a performance practice that both cites the self as remembered iterations... and sites the self with the theatrical frameworks of space, time and presence" (186, 194).

However, Stephan Spender suggests that the life narrator confronts not one life but two: "One is the self that others see—the social, historical person, with achievements, personal appearance, and social relationships. These are 'real' attributes of a person living in the world. But there is also the 'self' experienced only by that person, the self-felt from the inside that the writer can never get 'outside of'"(116). The "inside," or personally experienced, self, Spender continues, "has a history. While it may not be meaningful to objective 'history of the times,' it is a history of self-observation, not a history observed by others"(116). Besides, if there is dialogue in performance, there would technically be talking to the self, or the inward self or it could be directly talking to the audience.

Bridge and Tunnel (2016) is a one-woman autobiographical Broadway show in which stage actress Sarah Jones plays more than a dozen men and women and performs a series of character monologues meant to represent a cross section of New York's immigrant population. Jones switches characters by changing into sets of clothing hung on brightly colored set pieces. She is an astonishing mimic with a strange ability to change the texture, color and volume of her voice and even the shape of her body. She swaps accents and accessories to suit each character, but the real change is physical.

Thus, one may borrow a term from music to characterize Jones's multi-narrative work: "polyphonic," meaning "having two or more voices or parts, each with an independent melody, but all harmonizing." Polyphony "is a concept taken up by literary theory, speech act theory and linguistics to refer to the simultaneity of points of view and voices within a particular narrative plane. The concept was introduced by Mikhail Bakhtin, using a metaphor based on the musical term polyphony" (Morson6). Bakhtin's primary example of polyphony was Fyodor Dostoevsky's prose. Bakhtin contended that Dostoevsky, unlike previous novelists, did not provide a 'single vision', or describe situations with a 'monological' authorial voice. Instead, he aimed for fully dramatic novels of ideas in which conflicting views and characters are left to develop unevenly. According to Bakhtin, the chief characteristic of Dostoevsky's novels is "a plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses, a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices". His major characters are, "by the very nature of his creative design, not only objects of authorial discourse but also subjects of their own directly signifying discourse." (Bahktin7)

Likewise, as a biracial autobiographical narrator, Jones is self-consciously portraying her life as historically and psychologically representative of all types of immigrants to the United States. She is at the center of the historical picture she is assembling and is interested in the meaning of larger forces, conditions, and events for her own story: "We are not these separate, quote-unquote races. But I think that there are certain groups whose interests are served by perpetuating racism and the belief that not only are we different, but we should therefore separate ourselves. And I think if we remember how connected we actually are, it's actually a wonderful route to reconnect with ourselves. (Para.4)

Whereas autobiography generally tells the story of an individualized "I" and its unique experiences, in *Bridge and Tunnel* the "I" becomes plural and stands in for a community of people who share a common identity and representative, rather than unique, experiences. In his book, *Picture Theory: Essays on visual and Verbal Representation*, W.J.T. Mitchell argues that "memory is an intersubjective phenomenon...an intersubjective practice, a collective recollection of a

social past (193). Jones does not only present a personal experience, but rather a collective one. Memory does not only hold personal accounts of the past, but collective ones as well.

The play is a historically situated practice of self-representation where memory is contextual, a historically inflicted phenomenon. While personifying the many immigrants of different ages, races, ethnicities, and sexes who meet annually to share their cross-cultural love of poetry, Jones is taking control of her own fate in terms of the stage. Jones prefers to write her own narrative for performance and chooses to base her story on her own life.

As a woman of color, the playwright refuses to be represented by someone else's narrative and chooses to tell her own story from her own point of view. She selectively engages lived experience through personal storytelling. The most unexpected and striking aspect in the show is the sheer number of narratives one can encounter within the single experience of this play. Rather than a portrait, the play is a landscape; its many characters and subjects traversed the shared dramatic space without being overtly tied together. Thus, Jones's life narrative might best be approached as a set of ever shifting self-referential practices that engage the past in order to reflect on identity in the present.

In the meantime, the polyphony of Jones's theatre can be located in the relationship between the many different characters and elements that make up the theatrical experience: music, speech, light, set, movement, objects and so on. By turning each of these into independent textures and subsequently layering them, she creates a theatre in which – like in polyphonic music – different 'voices' compete for our attention. The effect of this is that the dramatic conflict is no longer to be found in a narrated story but becomes a feature of how these characters and elements sit together on the stage and it is up to the spectators to create their own 'story' from the disparate elements.

Jones comes from a multicultural family: her mother is a very white-appearing mixed person living life in a white skin and having white skin privilege from the time she was little, and living in a number of places, New York, Baltimore, and Washington which are vastly different

from one another, yet the same in some respects. Her grandmother was Irish-American and German-American, and her grandfather's family was from the Caribbean. Within that extended family were both Christians and Jews. Her father's family is African-American from the South. All this has helped Jones have various experiences that were part of her growing up and create all of these characters. She was also aware of what it meant to have relatives from various backgrounds from early on, and this helped train her ear whether she was aware of this or not. By investigating the manner in which Jones created her story and performed it, it would be argued that it was not simply her ability to control and own the stage, but a creative process of self-reflection and articulation.

Turning one's life into a story is laden with difficult representational and political choices concerning "which stories to tell, which culturally available narratives to draw upon, and which generic categories to affix to the final product. Narratives of mobility and/or immobility structure a wide variety of autobiographies that bring into view questions concerning the representation of the racialized, gendered, and classed body" (*Autobiography-Culture and Identity* Para.5).

Immigration narratives provide a culturally intelligible form for many autobiographies and call attention to the ways in which "citizen," "alien," and "immigrant" are shifting and socially constructed categories. They sometimes utilize other culturally available narratives such as the bildungsroman which follows a classic narrative trajectory of conversion in which the individual hero embarks on a long journey that ends with his resolution with the larger social community. The genre often features a main conflict between the main character and society. Typically, the values of society are gradually accepted by the protagonist and he/she is ultimately accepted into society: "The bildungsroman provides narrative shape and truth-value to a wide range of mainstream and marginal autobiographies published in the United States" (*Autobiography-Culture and Identity: Narrative Structures* Para.2).

Similarly, several immigrant, ethnic, and women autobiographers rely on the bildungsroman to give their stories a recognizable trajectory and broad cultural currency. "Many autobiographers have used this form deliberately and strategically in order to persuade their readers that they

too deserve a place of privilege in the United States and that their achievement of the "American Dream" is a result of individual hard work and intelligence"(*Autobiography-Culture and Identity: Narrative Structures* Para.2). Therefore, many autobiographies that are shaped by the bildungsroman narrative downplay structural inequities such as gender, ethnicity, race, class, sexuality, and ability. Jade Snow Wong and Richard Rodriguez, for example, openly dispute the assumption that gender or ethnicity has served as a barrier in their lives, even when their autobiographies clearly show otherwise. The bildungsroman, then, is a form that both enables and constrains the kinds of life stories that can be told by particular autobiographers.

Unlike the heroic journey narrative of the bildungsroman, which relies on an individualized story of social mobility, many autobiographical narratives of mobility and immobility engage questions of community, belonging, and citizenship and their relationship to how the freedoms of particular bodies are granted or restricted. Consequently, other immigration autobiographies resist the individualist trajectory of the bildungsroman by explicitly challenging the terms by which the nation-state defines "citizen" and "Other."

Jones's play belongs to the second type. She is convinced that the greatest art, the thing that moves her the most, is the thing that also inevitably makes her think about the times she lives in. That's why her work carries some political commentary in it: "If you are talking about your truth as an artist, you're going to touch on issues that are political in some way or are about social justice. So I think there is something so compelling about the truth, when you get at that truth it connects with people on a particular level that makes your art more viable"(Jones, *Interview2*). *Variety* argues, "This young monologist breaks out of the box with a comically loaded, politically pointed and achingly poignant show about New York's yearning masses of immigrants--represented here by more than a dozen fully fleshed-out characters who bare their souls while airing their grievances at a poetry slam"(Para.2).

Bridge and Tunnel is structured as an immigrant poetry reading taking place at the Bridge and Tunnel Café in "beautiful South Queens", where all sorts of immigrants have met to share their verse. Jones

performs a series of monologues, taking on the persona of the evening's host as well as all of the guest performers. *Variety* comments on the setting saying: "Starting with the show's setting--a poetry slam at a downtown club... is all focus, focus, focus. With its shallow stage, pinpoint lighting and self-mocking graphics (bold, brash and meaningless), the functional club setting provides unity of place and purpose for the many unrelated characters who step onstage to vent"(Para2). Onstage a sign reads, "I. A.M. A. P.O.E.T. T.O.O," an acronym that stands for "Immigrant and Multi-culturalist American Poets or Enthusiasts Traveling Toward Optimistic Openness." The play centers on a small spoken-word gathering, and the fourteen unusual characters that Jones brings to life. Charles Isherwood explains, "Now, here they are before us, those strangers who pique our interest and pass by. They're singing their souls from the stage, drawing us out of our own circumscribed worlds and into theirs. And all inhabit the remarkable person of Sarah Jones, the gifted author and sole star of 'Bridge & Tunnel'"(Para.3).

Costume changes are simple, accomplished with speed and precision. With a shirt dropping from the ceiling, a jacket appearing on a hanger, a scarf pulled out from a pocket and draped over the head, Jones impersonates a whole parade of immigrant New Yorkers who come up onstage to make their artistic contribution or to simply share a story. Both the sound scape and the lighting help complement whatever Jones wishes to reveal on stage. Gestures, accents, and speech rhythms help Jones a series of surprising and compelling transformations. Rob Kendt comments that among the many accomplishments of her extraordinary solo, "is the palpable sense of community Jones creates among her fourteen fictional characters. These finely drawn and even more sensitively acted figures—readers at an immigrant-themed South Queens poetry open mike—appear individually, with the merest change in posture, costume and eyewear"(Para.1). However, Jones knits their entrances and exits together so smoothly. Charles Isherwood comments,

Bridge & Tunnel is Ms. Jones's sweet-spirited valentine to New York City, its polyglot citizens and the larger notion of an all-inclusive America, that ideal place where concepts like liberty,

equality and opportunity have concrete meaning and are not just boilerplate phrases slapped around in stump speeches and news conferences. In 90 minutes of acutely observed portraiture gently tinted with humor, Ms. Jones plays more than a dozen men and women participating in an open-mike evening of poetry for immigrants, held at a friendly dive in "beautiful South Queens." (Para.2)

Plays which use one actor to embody multiple characters, "usually aim for fluid action and role changes in order to emphasize the performativity of the body"(Gilbert and Tompkins 234). Jones' artistry as a mimic is exceptional. As Rob Kendt puts it, "She can sketch a person's entire body of experience on her thin, rangy frame, then color in these contours with her voice, which can modulate texture and tempo as freely as she changes accents"(Para.2). However, Kendt continues, "it soon dawns on us with something close to awe that Jones is not really mimicking at all but rendering a world with a novelistic attention to detail"(Para.2). If *Bridge and Tunnel* feels more like the non-fiction variety, it is probably because the participants at Jones' imagined poetry reading do not offer poems as much as they do straightforward narratives about their immigrant experiences. This show is not about story line but about stories, very personal stories with distinctly individual perspectives. Jones delivers monologues from the perspectives of fourteen distinct characters of different ages and cultural backgrounds. The characters in the work explore issues of assimilation in modern urban America. They travel the roads of assimilation to tell the story of American change in an ever-changing America. In an Interview, Sarah Jones explains,

I'd say my work and my performance are rooted in characters I develop based loosely on composites of real people. And then I try to write monologues from the perspective of these invented people and that hopefully offer something that perhaps an audience might not know about them. I refer to them as "my people"; I really, you know, kind of speak of them in the third person. And I really believe in them, so I love giving them a chance to share what they believe on stage. So sometimes in a context like this, I'll share some of the characters' voices themselves, because they're a lot

more expressive than I can be about them when I just let them be themselves. (Para.5)

Throughout *Bridge and Tunnel* Jones addresses how American perceptions of immigrants differ based on country of origin, class, and religious practices: "But as skilled as Jones is at inhabiting these impossibly diverse ages, genders, and nationalities, what makes *Bridge & Tunnel* more than a mere virtuoso showcase is the acuity and insight of her writing. Jones captures the distinct voices of these variegated immigrants with an authorial touch "(Kendt, Para.3).

Jones brings the characters' seemingly unrelated stories into conversation with one another and challenges the audience to find connections. By juxtaposing unlike stories, she also highlights the breadth of American immigrant experiences. If she holds back on conflict among her characters, though, Jones does not shy away from the complexities of their bi-cultural immigrant lives.

Most of the monologues have an explicitly progressive message of racial equality and cultural tolerance. Jones crafts her own monologues and invents the "Bridge and Tunnel Café" in order to bring her characters' lives together. In his book *Autobiographics*, Leigh Gilmore argues that, "autobiography draws its authority less from its resemblance to real life than from its proximity to discourses about truth and identity, less from reference and mimesis than from the cultural power of truth-telling (3). In Gilmore's view, then, the "demands made by autobiography" can lead to "silencing and shaming effects"(3).

In order to connect the various monologues, Jones embodies a Pakistani Republican master of ceremonies humorously named Muhammad Ali. She establishes the tone and context for the piece through this one recurring character who, during the course of one evening, introduces us to different characters. Ali enthusiastically promotes a comprehensive and hopeful philosophy that everyone is a poet with something special to share.

Collectively, these characters are a remarkable cross-section of New York's immigrant populations, "their accents rich with the music of the old country, their heads spinning with the raucous discord of urban

life in the new world"(Para 5). Individually, they are astonishing creations. Each character brings with her or with him, "a colorful life-history an equally colorful accent, and a unique way of moving. We soon forget that all of them emanate from one body – and one voice -- that of the empathetic actress, Jones" (Puri 32).

Ali is the welcoming host who is hopelessly proud of his terrible sense of humor. As *Variety* puts it, "Stiff and square in his cheap suit jacket, but brimming with goodwill and pathetically eager to please, Muhammad is gently but firmly satirized for his humorless attempts at wit"(Para.7). Ali's monologues introduce the other characters; something that helps see the characters not only through the eyes of the audiences but also through the eyes of Muhammad Ali himself.

Moreover, Ali's monologues gesture to the play's post-9/11 subtext: before the poetry reading commences, *Bridge and Tunnel's* audience overhears Ali on the phone with his wife discussing a pending investigation by the Department of Homeland Security: "Amina, you can't worry yourself like this...That was only a phone call. I'm sure everything's fine...that was years ago...give or take a few days...but I'm sure this 'investigation' business is either an honest mistake or...I am an accountant...we have nothing to hide."(2) Ali's cheerful attitude "is a tribute to immigrants who flourish in spite of America's ambivalence and suspicion toward its newest arrivals"(Knight720).

Dressed as an old homeless woman named "Miss Lady," Sarah Jones, urges theatergoers to keep an open mind and turn off their cell phones. The play runs for ninety minutes without an intermission.

Playing a Jamaican actress, Gladys, Jones jokes that the two opportunities that America provides for Jamaican immigrants are becoming Secretary of State or taking care of children, two names for the same job. "There are basically fewer careers possibilities for people of Jamaican ancestry in this country. One is to become secretary of state. Another is to take care of children. But you see, either way it's the same thing, because you have to run behind the over-privileged baby who can barely form sentences." (10) These monologues resist the limitations that

American expectations put on immigrant lives and identities, and each reflects Jones's desire to put different perspectives on stage.

"For all the truthfulness of these individual portraits, there's a certain amount of rose-colored thinking in juxtaposing them without sparking any inter-cultural tension"(Kendt Para.4). The closest the show comes to that kind of friction is when DJ Rashid, a bouncy young quick-talking rapper in a big orange parka, rushes the stage and offers some ill-considered opinions of Barack Obama and the resemblance between immigrants and African-Americans: "I can relate as a black man, even though I was born here...Because it's like black people...we got imported. But then y' all get deported...I'm just trying to talk about the similarities in the struggle. See, it's a black thing and it's an immigrant thing. It's all connected."(21)

Traumatized people who, "suffer from the agonies of traumatic memory are haunted by memories that obsessively interrupt a present moment and insist on their presence"(Smith and Watson21). One character, a Chicano union organizer in a wheelchair named Juan José, injured on a construction site, talks with heart-breaking past-tense hopefulness about his crushed dreams. He tells a story about the poverty that forces him to leave Mexico and the tragic border crossing that kills his lover. He tells of his arduous journey north in search of economic advantages: "For money migrants never see, though we earn it. Love that filled our hearts, but did nothing for our bellies... So, I made my choice. I made my way to the United States. No documents. Eight hours in the trunk of a coyote's car to get across the border, and nine days in the desert."(11) José's life has been continuously interrupted by the past traumatic memories of his life with his lover. The shadow of his dead beloved keeps revisiting him whether awake or asleep: "But she would still want to hold me now, and hold me while I'm sleeping by myself, dreaming I am playing soccer. Dreaming of Veronica, beautiful, a little darker, a little shorter than those girls...I dream of us working together."(12) His tale quiets the audience; while the young, Australian, Monique's searing poem about an ex-lover solicits harsh laughter.

From the Chicano union organizer, Jones transforms to a Jordanian woman in her mid-fifties named Habiba who wears a head

covering (hijab). Habiba tells an unexpectedly lighthearted story about her childhood spent listening to the Beatles and writing love poetry to a boy next door. She praises sensual Arab poetry and women's freedom. She finds the voice for her forbidden love in a Beatles lyric. She follows an impressive outburst of Arabic verse with its translation into the English lyrics of a very familiar song. The audiences are touched. Rajika Puri comments, "We not only chuckle, but are touched. Many of us find similar cherished memories of our first love in such a song" (32). Before leaving the stage, Habiba looks to Juan Jose in the audience and addresses him: "I am reminded of this now, only because of your poetry. Because you are all wearing your words on your sleeves tonight in this way, and that is an act of courage...that is an act of love. Good night."(14)

Monologue dramas and performances rarely maintain, "The conventions of a naturalistic stage space". On the contrary, Clare Wallace explains, "the empty stage or site-specific locations deliberately disrupt the illusion of the fourth wall" (*Monologue Theatre* 6). One of the distinctive traits of solo performance resides in its frequent lack of a fourth wall separating the performer from the audience.

A conservative Chinese mother in her early forties, Mrs. Ling, then appears and narrates how she raises her kids to be proud of their tradition, though she knows that they get some American traditions as well: "I speak Chinese to them, they always answer me back in English. My son always loves rock music...my daughter too. But when the time comes for them to start thinking about getting married, that's what I expect them to realize a little bit more than their own culture. That's where we have some problems."(22) However, she learned to accept her lesbian daughter who anguished at having to part with a girlfriend who lacks permanent residency.

Then, a sweet kvetchy Polish-German-Lithuanian grandma, Lorrain, assures today's immigrants that her parents, Eastern European Jews, were treated with exactly the same suspicion and prejudice that greets today's new arrivals: "When my family came here-from Eastern Europe-they were saying the same thing about us immigrants that they say about you now. It's true. They said we were dirty, or uncivilized. Troublemakers. That we only stayed in the ghettos-but nobody wanted

you around!"(5) Kendt comments, "If she skimps on conflict among her characters, though, Jones doesn't flinch from the complexities of their bi-cultural immigrant lives"(Para.6).

Metamorphosing into an educated Vietnamese youth on fire with anger, Jones sharply criticizes the stereotype of the "Model Minority" that obscures the different ethnicities and experiences designated by the term "Asian." The Vietnamese-American slam poet, Bao, counts the ways he is alienated from both mainstream culture and from his own. "This poem is about refugee boats and blocked memories. My mom never going back about Napalm crack and long cold uptown nights. This poem is about hoodies and knife fights. About minimum wages and searchlights. This poem is a slur-proof shield and an arsenal of anger to wield."(8) He writes this poem, "for the Vietnamese history chapter my school never had. This poem is a beginning and a middle. A flood, an affirmation, a cry and a riddle. A warning, a bruising, a coming apart. A pain before healing, a window. A start."(8)

A soft-spoken Haitian woman who survived an ocean crossing to land in detention in Miami embodies the mix of optimism and outrage felt by newcomers who believe in the American promise with more passion than natives ever do:"I want to say; hey I am American, too! I am a citizen...How about you have to leave your own country with nothing, so you don't be killed. You work every job you can find very, very hard. You save all your money eleven years so you will have down payment for house. (26) She continues in real pain saying, "When you go in real estate they keep telling you they don't have something in the right neighborhood for you! (26)

The evening's most striking moment comes when a stage struck eleven- year- old Dominican girl reads a free verse poem from a school notebook in a cheerful singsong, pausing when she gets a laugh. "I would like to read this poem that I wrote...Ms. Rios gave us the writing assignment about what we want to be when we grow up and I said I didn't want to grow up and she said why. (15) The name of the poem is "I don't want to Grow Up"). She does not want to grow up so that she will not feel the pain the adults undergo: "A grownup never relaxes. I don't want to grow up and be so tired like my mother from working and caring for me

and my brother. I don't want to grow up and be scared like my dad and forget to have fun. I don't want to be stressed and yell at everyone. and regret what I did. I just want to stop time and keep being a kid."(16) Kendt argues, "Not only is Jones' rendition of this pre-teen pixie close to an out-of-body experience; the girl's poem, about not wanting to grow up and feel her elders' pain, is a gem-like study in Jones' ability to write pointedly from within her characters' experiences"(Para.6). *Variety* comments on the characters saying:

The substance of their stories, combined with the specificity of their idioms, invests each character with a history that fits as aptly as the caps, jackets, shawls and habits that Jones whisks on and off with lightning speed. As dazzling as the physical transformations are--each accomplished with entirely distinctive verbal expression and body language—they come from some intimate place far removed from the hooks and racks on which the costumes hang. They come from Jones' extraordinary perceptions and profound insights into the character of the "outsider."(Para.7)

Although every one of these lives constitutes a miniature drama, hearts will surely go out to Mohammed Ali. This kind, inexperienced man is Jones' most fully realized creation and the embodiment of her political message: "an immigrant who implicitly understands and honors the values that America stands for, but who, by virtue of being an immigrant, stands in real and constant danger of being denied the freedoms he was promised. That's a strong message, and all the more powerful for being delivered with heartfelt humor--and without a hint of stridency"(*Variety*, Para.6).

Though 'Bridge and Tunnel' is a pejorative term sometimes used to describe immigrant neighborhoods in New York, Jones appropriates the expression to address the ways that immigrants are not only connected through the hope that they find in America, but also through American anger and fear regarding cultural difference. Through poems, prefaces, speeches and performance art, Jones patches together large and small pieces of the varied American immigrant experience. Isherwood explains,

In short, if multiculturalism is a dirty word to you, "Bridge & Tunnel" will probably give you hives. But Ms. Jones has closely studied the way all sorts of people order their thoughts, express their hopes and fears and tentatively try to fit the whole of their personalities into an inadequate new vocabulary. The stories of their struggles and anxieties have the uneven rhythms and shaggy shape of experience clumsily but feelingly put into unfamiliar words; they are never just anecdotes cut and trimmed to form political paper airplanes aimed at the audience. (Para.7)

In fact, portraying people who are not the typical heroes or focal points of theatre or any other media was one of Jones's dreams that came true with this performance. Jones believes, "We know that we if we want to have images of black folks, usually we have to go to either a black outlet or we have to-- you know, they're not considered mainstream still. This is pretty much as I can fulfill my multiple goals at one time on stage"(Interview, Para8).

A great gift of *Bridge & Tunnel* is to feel empathy for the show's outsiders:"marginalized people who are too often absent from our stages and audiences, let alone our national conversation. It is quite another to do what Jones does here, which is to put such empathy into action, and to demonstrate its imaginative power on no less a platform than a commercial Broadway stage"(Kendt, Para.7).

As a woman of color with dark skin and a noticeably female physical build, Jones's ability to perform different races and genders supports the claim that both race and gender are performative. Isherwood points out,

Ms. Jones, who was born in Baltimore, is an astonishing mimic with an uncanny ability to alter the texture, color and volume of her voice and even the shape of her body. Close your eyes and you would never imagine that the breathy chirp of that nervous but exhilarated 11-year-old girl could come from the same larynx unleashing those guttural expletives from the old Russian guy. Open them again, and wonder at how this lanky actress seems to lose six inches when she slips into the persona of the cocky young

African-American rapper, who looks like a giant tangerine in his oversize orange parka. These are technical skills that invite gasps of admiration, and deserve them. Just don't downgrade Ms. Jones's talent to a mere gift for impressions, an actor's stunt...Proof that Ms. Jones has put her actorly gifts in service to something larger than self-display is found in her writing for these fully imagined characters, which is lively, compassionate, mildly sardonic and smart. (Para.4)

Jones is not really mimicking; her characters are full blown human beings, who are given such wonderful words to speak that we hang on to their every word, often dissolving into laughter and tears. They discuss how traits such as skin color and accents limit opportunities for immigrant populations. "*Bridge and Tunnel* allows the artist to explore the possibilities within her own identity on stage without trivializing the lived experience of racial and ethnic identity in America at large"(Knight722). Amanda Cooper in *CurtainUp Review* describes Jones as a, "stellar. From start to finish, she is a truly transcendent, elegant performer. Her attention to detail pushes her characters well beyond stereotypes and typical traps of solo plays"(Para.1).

Bridge and Tunnel allows the artist to emphasize how poetry and language remain useful means of sharing life experiences and to draw support from a sympathetic audience; the "I am a Poet Too" gathering serves as an imaginary safe place for immigrants to share their disappointments. Jones simultaneously attempts to use the tools of the spoken word to challenge *Bridge and Tunnel's* audience's worldviews and to give faces to the caricatures of immigrant difference. Yet, the play ends without a call to action or a challenge to the mores of the audience members: "Muhammad Ali thanks the last of the poets and welcomes his fellow immigrants to a multicultural potluck upstairs. Jones's immigrants and their touching stories fade as the house lights come up on a hundred colorful bodies in the Berkeley theatre"(Knight722).

What ultimately separates Jones's play is not the way it seeks out differences; it is the way she celebrates similarities: "The inhumanity that one self-described group can show to another; I don't believe that can happen if we're able to see each other as part of one whole, as opposed to

enemies or adversaries. If people can actually connect, we see that there isn't really any separation; there is no "us and them" and therefore there can be no 'us' versus 'them'"(Jones Para.7). Jones notes that the struggle has been going on for generations in America, and continues to unfold within individual families as well. Reconciliation is her theme, the search by many different people for happiness and security among many other different people.

By delivering monologues from fourteen different multicultural personalities, the Tony Award-winning performer and playwright Sarah Jones dedicates her work to bringing people together through the power of shared stories and connecting across cultures. By inhabiting these impossibly diverse ages, genders, and nationalities and allowing so much difference to share the same space and the same body, Jones comes to personify her theme of peaceful coexistence and reveal her spectacular character range. She could easily sketch a person's entire body on her thin frame and modulate her voice's texture and tempo to capture the distinct voices of these multicolored immigrants so well. With her extraordinary ability to change personas, Jones is exploring the fine line between stereotyping and celebrating different ethnic groups. While switching between characters, Jones is deconstructing herself, based on her experiences of feeling disconnected, and her belief that multiplicity is automatically healing. For her, being different felt truly scary. She wished she could blend in, appear normal and feel accepted.

Sarah Jones has multiple personalities; all live inside her head. She has made a living out of embodying multiethnic characters onstage and using their voices to tell a story. She discovered she could make a career out of trying to belong. Hiding behind these personalities, Jones could flee the fact that she less than others and that she is the plain old Sarah from Queens.

Jones does not just play different races and characters well; she is committed to depicting the humanity within each of her characters. Performing not only allows her to make sense of the different people she contains within herself but also provides an opportunity for her audiences to do the same.

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