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Black Pearl Sings!

By Frank Higgins

Directed by Lou Bellamy

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SPOTLIGHT INTERVIEW: Director Lou Bellamy

by Stephanie Lein Walseth, August Wilson Fellow

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LEIN WALSETH: To begin with, how did you come across the script for *Black Pearl Sings!* and why did you decide to produce it?

BELLAMY: I came across it while I was directing down at Kansas City Repertory Theatre. The theatre is at the University of Missouri in Kansas City, and they share a building. I was down there directing when the playwright, Frank Higgins, saw my work and said that he wanted me to do his play. He kept at it, and kept at it, and finally I read the play. Although it isn't without issue, it is a very interesting take on a true story, and it's something that black writers have been dealing with and negotiating for *years*, and that is this idea of cultural property – who owns it, who's responsible for it, and what is its proper use? This play is *right* in the middle of all of that. The other thing that fascinated me about it is that the germ of the idea for the play comes from a real life situation where a song was taught by an African woman to her granddaughter or daughter when she was brought to the United States during slavery. The function of the song in Mende [the specific Western African language], is to connect you with ancestors, and this particular song ended up doing exactly that some 200 years later. It's *amazing*.

LEIN WALSETH: Are you referring to what [Education Director] Sarah [Bellamy] wrote about in the contextual essay in the study guide for the production?

BELLAMY: Yes. There's that film, *The Language You Cry In*. Have you seen that?

LEIN WALSETH: No, not yet.

BELLAMY: Oh, Stephanie! Oh, you *gotta!*

LEIN WALSETH: Okay, I'm on it! Do you have a copy?

BELLAMY: Yes. Sarah's got one and I've given mine to the actors. But it is the story of a woman in a Gullah community in coastal Georgia that knows this Mende song, which was taught to her by her mother, but she's not aware of the song's significance. While the performance of the song has been passed down, the original meaning has been lost.

It's similar to what happens with rituals. For instance, someone takes out a bottle and pours a little bit on the ground and says, "This is for the boys upstate," you know, the guys in prison. But what they're unaware of is that they're really pouring an African libation.

Well, these Gullah people are singing this song, and they're using it to jump rope with, and for dancing, and other sorts of things. So, a team of researchers, an anthropologist and an ethnomusicologist tape the song and take the recording with them to Africa. Working with a linguist in Sierra Leone, they create a contemporary translation, and then the three of them travel to all of these villages, playing the recording to see if anyone recognizes it. Some people recognize a few words in the song, but not the song itself, and so the team decides to leave. But just before they go, one of them says, "Let's check one more place," and they go to a village called Senehun Ngola, and they play the song and these women start singing along.

LEIN WALSETH: That must have been *amazing*.

BELLAMY: Yeah! And it's a funeral rite that connects the person singing it with their ancestors. It's similar to another situation that you and I have talked about where - who was the Native American who had the dream about the Ghost Dance, and being protected by bullet-proof shirts?

LEIN WALSETH: Wovoka?

BELLAMY: Yes! Well, it didn't work for the Ghost Dance. They were shot and they died, the shirts did not protect them. *But*, the same tribe, we find out later on, is rejuvenating their economy with a business that makes bullet proof vests for cops! His dream was that these shirts would turn their plight around...and they did! [*Laughs with an expression of amazement, and Lein Walseth joins in*] Isn't that cool?

LEIN WALSETH: Yeah.

BELLAMY: So, the vision is *right*. They just wanted it a little too quickly. And so the function of this Mende song is *right*, and it *works*, and it pulls generations together. When you see the film you will *not* believe it. The American woman and her family meet these women in this tiny village in Sierra Leone, and they all sing the song together, connecting their heritage across hundreds of years and thousands of miles. So, it's exciting.

LEIN WALSETH: Wow.

BELLAMY: Wow. Yeah.

LEIN WALSETH: There is so much richness in everything you've just said, a lot of which we'll come back to in some of the other questions. So, to return for a moment to the playwright, it sounds like this was the first time you had met him, when you were at Kansas City Rep?

BELLAMY: Yeah. Yeah.

LEIN WALSETH: I was curious how you knew him and if you had worked with him before?

BELLAMY: He teaches at the University down there. I believe he teaches playwriting.

LEIN WALSETH: Can you tell us anything more about him, about his writing, and about this play's production history?

BELLAMY: He's been working on *Black Pearl Sings!* for at least five years. It was developed at the Barter Theater, it had its world premiere at Stages Repertory Theatre in Houston, and it's been produced at Florida Studio Theatre, and recently at Ford's Theatre [*in Washington D.C.*], the one that Lincoln met his match at. I know that Northlight in Chicago is planning a production, because the Artistic Director's coming up to visit during our run. So, it's getting some interest all over the country.

LEIN WALSETH: I'm also wondering about the cast and how each of the women was chosen for this production. The Education Department has recently been working on transcribing and editing interviews with many of Penumbra's early company members for the Wilson Lab project, so I feel like I've been getting to know a lot of the core group of artists that have worked with the company throughout its history. Are these women a part of Penumbra's company, or are they familiar with Penumbra's ensemble approach? If not, how has that changed rehearsals or the way that you've approached this piece?

BELLAMY: One of them, curiously the *white* female, is most familiar with Penumbra's work - Stacia Rice. She runs her own theater here in the Twin Cities. I ended up finding Crystal Fox, who plays Pearl, by going down to Atlanta where she was in a production of *For Colored Girls*. I went down to see her perform and was just knocked out.

I'm trying to walk a fine line with this production. This play, the emotional wallop and the kind of union that happens between actor and audience tends to happen over these black cultural works, the songs themselves. They're so evocative that they are the places where the play *meets* the audience - the depth of that black experience as expressed through music comes into direct play with the dialogue and it has a power that's *really intense*. So, you need actors who can handle dialogue that doesn't necessarily build toward those little arcs or denouements that happen. It calls for a kind of craft that is difficult to find, and these women *have it*. They are, boy, they're actresses. *Wow!* They're so interesting on their own, and part of our job together is about learning when to let all that out, and when to keep it down and so forth. But they really understand what I'm trying to do. I come up with ideas and they have no problem telling me they don't like them or that they like them, whatever it might be. And so there's a kind of a collaboration that is happening between us that is what we do as a company. It's so amazing that neither of these women are company members, but the experience and the respect for the experience of the text and their deep craft and good work ethic still get to where that company starts. We did have to do a little talking at the beginning of the rehearsal process, but once we got there, they just understood it totally. And it's because they're just *so good*. So good. They're also opposite in more than race. You look at Stacia and she's very tall and stands straight, and Crystal's a little short ball of fire, and she moves fast. So, even their physical types are thrown into contrast with each other and it really does work. It's also different being in the room...the stage manager's a woman, and so I'm in this room [*sighs and laughs*] with these three women and it's *really interesting*, it's *different*. [*both laugh*]

LEIN WALSETH: Well, that brings me to my next question, which is, it's been a while since Penumbra has produced an all-female-cast show - so why this play, why now? In previous interviews you've talked about wanting to give focus to young African American males because you see them being forgotten...

BELLAMY: Yeah.

LEIN WALSETH: So, I'm curious about this play specifically, and if the female aspect of it had anything to do with your choosing it at this moment?

BELLAMY: Sure, sure it did. But, it is of consideration and comes into play that the piece was written by a white male. I didn't know how much that comes into play until we began to work on it. That the playwright's a male, and that these women have to say these words that come through his understanding of femininity is interesting. That they have to deal with me in expressing that is also interesting, and hopefully it's an opportunity to open up rather than a hurdle. But, you take, for instance, the way the playwright perceives work songs. It's *really interesting*. We're dealing with this in rehearsals right now. He tends to use these songs as places where the two women get together. There's a song, "Hard Times in Old Virginia", and the black woman sings, [*sings*] "Hard times in old Virginia" and then the white female is supposed to sing the refrain. Well, he means it as a place where they come together. But I perceive work songs a little differently than that [*laughs*] and so it's really difficult to do. In fact, I've given up on trying to make it work, and I just have the black woman singing the song right now. They knew this *immediately*, onstage. These women knew that they couldn't *share* that moment, it was asking too much of that song and that experience. I think we're finding out so many of those

things, that for me, as a man, I perceive them a certain way, and these women look at it in another way.

LEIN WALSETH: What is that difference, do you think? Has there been another moment in which you've interpreted something differently, based on gender?

BELLAMY: Well, first of all, stereotypically, men expect women to be more caring, more nurturing, we expect them to get along better with each other, and so forth, and it just isn't the case! [*laughs*] It's wrongheaded, you know? They go through all of the same negotiations as men do. They may *look* different, but some of the same things are going on. The way this script moves, the women dance together after, I think, seven pages. It was hard for me to get there, and it was hard for them to get there, but I think a male perceives that as more possible with women. I can't imagine two men getting up and doing a dance on "Little Sally Walker" or anything else that quickly. It's just, men expect, I think, women to get over these things more quickly and to show a kind of feminine solidarity or something. The playwright moves in that direction because the white female is working under a chauvinistic society, and in that sense there are lots of parallels between the two women, but to equate their specific circumstances tends to lessen both.

LEIN WALSETH: So, have any of those moments of disjunction caused the script or the production to change?

BELLAMY: Oh yeah. I feel like it's my duty to bring my understanding of the interaction between these women to bear on the text, and that will flex the text in various kinds of ways. I like to go for alternate meanings and make an audience deal with the contradictions between the spoken word and the action, and there are all kinds of opportunities for that to happen in this play. And again, we've got these women who are such wonderful actresses, who can keep all of those balls in the air at the same time.

LEIN WALSETH: Speaking of different interpretations, what do you think people need to know, historically speaking, in order for the events of the play to make sense? What context is crucial for audiences to be able to deeply engage with his piece?

BELLAMY: I think it's important for them to begin thinking about the negotiation of cultural practices and cultural property. For example, the way in which the white female begins to understand her work in recording these songs. She's doing a good thing, she's preserving cultural property that otherwise might not be remembered. So, her willingness to take a role in preserving those songs is worthwhile. The Library of Congress has archived John and Ruby Lomax's recordings of southern music as well as Alan Lomax's collection, and that's a good thing to have happen. But, the idea of commodifying that property comes into play immediately, and the people who create the cultural property, the songs, don't get to share in the worth of the products that emerge from those recordings. The playwright actually has the women talk about it. Pearl says "Okay, if I give you my song, what do I get out of it?" And she ends up bartering to get something out of it for herself. But this act of negotiation that I find really interesting, is a reflection of something that is real and going on constantly. There is a constant negotiation of cultural practices as they reach the borders and the limits of a culture. The meanings and use of those practices tend to change.

LEIN WALSETH: It's interesting that you mention how this process is ongoing and happening currently. So often, with these plays that are set in the past, it is easy for us in the audience to say, "Well, that was then, but now in our contemporary moment we're doing so much better. That kind of thing doesn't happen anymore. Not now, not where I live." But one of

the things that struck me after reading this play was how the artist Moby, in his album *Play*, samples from these songs. I've heard the album for years, but then one night I was listening to it and realized that they are *sorrow songs*. They're *work songs*.

BELLAMY: Exactly.

LEIN WALSETH: In fact, when I looked it up, I found out that Moby sampled directly from Alan Lomax's recordings, which tie directly to this play. And that album has sold over 9 million copies worldwide...

BELLAMY: I know it!

LEIN WALSETH: ...and so I think connections like that require us to reflect on the politics of contemporary practices as well. So, in terms of this fine line of potential cultural appropriation, where do you see some of these connections still happening today?

BELLAMY: Oh, I think that perhaps the most powerful and commodified cultural product in the world now is black male identity. Black styles, black music. I hear kids out in the suburbs where I live, white kids, calling each other nigger. I hear them listening to black music, I see them dress with their hats all turned around, and they're sagging and bagging. So, that's a really powerful influence. Now, it is meant to be a kind of adolescent rebellion, I'm sure. They're saying to their parents, "Look, I'll go *here*." But still, it exerts a powerful influence and it's continually going on. You look at banks using rap music in commercials, you know, all that sort of stuff. It's managed, and it's interesting to look at the way that management is constructed. It isn't very different than the plantation system of the old south where labor is converted into all sorts of things. So, it goes on, sure.

LEIN WALSETH: In addition to appropriation, this play addresses two other As – anthropology and authenticity. Susannah tries to convince Pearl that a prison uniform will somehow 'authentically' represent her on stage, while Pearl argues that this is not her defining feature. And at the same time, Susannah is careful not to reveal too much about herself. What is your take on how the idea of authenticity is working in this play, how each of the women understand it, and what this says about authenticity and race?

BELLAMY: Well, again I'm struck by nothing being new. Doesn't this sound like Ridgely Torrence, and Paul Green, and all of those shows like *Green Pastures*, where blacks represented 'unadorned man', a kind of 'authentic' being? Native Americans have been that as well for us, a sort of 'man without the accoutrements of civilization'. Likewise, Pearl, by virtue of her race and her condition is seen as 'authentic'. The playwright makes this comparison where Susannah, whose name is based on the song "Oh, Susannah," perceives herself *not* to be authentic by her standard of living, her educational level, and where she comes from. So, for her it's a study of a lower class, which she then perceives to be the 'authentic human condition.' Pearl understands that, and she says, "Why is hoodoo an expression of authenticity and 'Oh, Susannah' is not?" Well, that's an interesting question, you know?

LEIN WALSETH: Yes, and in terms of anthropology and outsider interpretations, what is so interesting are those moments when Pearl sets Susannah straight, both about the significance of her own name, and also about the significance of Pearl's blue handkerchief. What fear and/or desire do you think is revealed in Susannah's (and presumably others outside of the black community) insistence that there must be magical power in these items?

BELLAMY: Well, I'm not going to discount that there isn't a kind of a spiritual connection to objects and ancestors that is different in this cultural context. For Pearl, it's very real that all of these elements exist together in an object, and she doesn't afford one element any more influence than the others. But for Susannah that balance gets thrown off, so that something like a handkerchief becomes almost fetish-like. And she forgets other meanings, like the fact that the cross is a part of the Christian iconology. There are tons of things that Susannah has, but she doesn't perceived them to have that kind of elemental power.

LEIN WALSETH: So, you're talking about the complexity of those objects and the complexity of the cultural understanding that goes along with them. I think, to some degree, the sole focus on the magical power of an item like the handkerchief helps those outside the culture looking at it to gloss over its historical significance and the real material conditions like the war and poverty that it represents. An interpretation with a focus on the object's magical potential tends to erase those conditions, pulls it out of context, and allows people like Susannah to not have to engage it in any self-reflective way.

BELLAMY: Sure. Exactly, exactly. And the playwright's very perceptive when he has Pearl relate what that handkerchief means, that her grandfather carried it in the war, and so forth. When she finishes the story she says something like, "The truth isn't what you expected, is it?" That doesn't negate the power of the object, but there's a different basis for it.

LEIN WALSETH: Yes, absolutely. That's a very revealing moment. What do you make of the women's friendship? Is there depth to it, or is it a falsity that makes a difficult situation more bearable? Do they get to a true reciprocity, or is it more a system of guarded and self-interested bartering?

BELLAMY: I think it is bartered, and they are guarded, but there are times when the human condition reaches across those barriers even when they don't want it to. You know this in real life. I mean, you can just be *so against* someone and everything they do, and then something happens and that human connection pierces all of your defenses. There are a number of those moments that I set up in this piece, some that the playwright's planned for and some that I bring in.

I find so much rests on this black music – that's what's bringing them together. There's an interesting place when Pearl is grieving when she finds out her daughter has died, and she sings a song that her daughter sang as a girl, and Susannah, who doesn't know how to grieve in this culturally specific way, brings up this song from the Appalachians somewhere, and she sings it and there's a refrain in it that is almost a wail, the way Sanford [Moore], our Music Director, has constructed it. And the refrain is [*sings*] "Aaaand, six feet of earth will make us all of one size." Oh! Well, Pearl is doing this black thing and it's this one way of grieving, and then Susannah comes in with this song and it's another way of grieving, and you recognize the similarity. Those moments that they find, they're just little nuggets. They're quite wonderful.

I think in the end, however, it doesn't mean that it's all over and they're fast friends. Pearl doesn't ever give Susannah that song. Pearl understands that that song has innate power but also commodified power, and she wants her granddaughter to reap the benefits of that knowledge, *not* Susannah. She says, "This is something that my granddaughter is going to know and study and learn about," and so forth, "not you." And then she says, "I'm sorry, but I want it that way." That's how it ends.

Again, it's interesting the way the playwright perceives the worth of these songs versus the way I perceive their worth. He has in his notations, and it's not wrong, it's just the way he views

this song and the experience of it, he says that Pearl starts to sing an “African Song” at the end, and that drums begin to come on, and she gets bigger and stretches her arms to the heavens and so forth. Well, for *me*, I have this moment get smaller and smaller and smaller as the song becomes more hers. She owns it, and it isn’t this [*spreads arms out and raises them*], but a more soulful and centering experience for her. Isn’t that interesting the way we each view that moment? And it doesn’t mean that he isn’t appreciative of it or understanding in his way of the use of the song, but it’s really, really different. We ran into the same things with the work songs.

LEIN WALSETH: I’m glad that you talked about the song at the end of this play, because I was going to ask you about music and its centrality to the piece. I’ll always remember how you staged the work song “Oh, Berta” in *The Piano Lesson*, and the quiet and intense power of all of those men singing, especially because you played against that pull towards epicness. I wondered if there were going to be any moments like that in this piece, and now you’ve just talked about a couple of them which sound like they’ll be quite beautiful.

BELLAMY: Anytime you get one of those work songs...you know, you can hear that stuff and it means something outside of the culture, it can have a kind of a beauty that is arresting. But inside of the culture it’s doing something else, and it’s bittersweet, and even the people who participate in it from the culture don’t necessarily understand it. It takes on a meaning larger than them by its performance. I have that happen here. Susannah asks Pearl, “You must have something with more meat on it?” And Pearl goes, “Meat? What do you mean, meat?” Susannah says, “Pain.” And Pearl starts to sing this song, this old work song, and she can’t even finish it. At first she’s thinking, “Okay, this is my way out. Here. Here’s one.” And then she gets into it, considers her own condition, and these chains (chains – a big thing for black people), and then cannot finish the song that is written to be finished. But it means something different. And there’s something about the performance of these rituals, as in *Piano Lesson*, that is the larger metaphor for the play. The performance of the song is the thing doing and the thing being done, whether or not you’re in it. It takes on another significance of deeper meaning that tricks us continually, you know? That’s why we have manners, I just know it. I sit down and I say to you, “Here, sit down,” and I pull out a chair for you. That sets up a kind of interaction that would be different if we didn’t start it that way. So doing that *does* something. Singing the song *does* something.

LEIN WALSETH: And what do you make of the fact that the audience gets to hear that song at the end of the play? It’s something I’ve been conflicted about, because she’s been withholding it from Susannah, and by proxy from a larger white audience, in order to keep it within her own cultural context. Presumably there will be white people in the audience for this production, so what does it mean that we get to see what Pearl was working so hard to protect?

BELLAMY: That’s why it had to be personal. It’s interesting, because we’ve been researching accurate pronunciations of the Mende words in the song, because this is a black theater, we’ve got to pronounce all the words right, you know? And we’re finding that this isn’t of the same sort of import for the playwright. But for us, that’s *everything!* It’s *everything*.

LEIN WALSETH: Of course. And the same is true for so many of the Native American artists I’ve worked with. I’ve heard them say again and again, “We have a responsibility to tell this accurately because we’re speaking for our people.” There is a lot at stake in these representations.

Continuing to talk about the music, you’ve discussed throughout our conversation the different ways you understand music to be functioning in the piece. Through the play we also become

aware of the various functions and value of music for each of the women – for Susannah it serves as a means of tracing migration patterns and creating genealogies, and as an opportunity for so-called ‘discoveries’ and prestigious job placement, and for Pearl it is a way of connecting with others and solidifying cultural ties, a means to maintain historical threads, and a way of making back-breaking labor bearable. How do you think music functions in the theater? Why do audiences seem to love it so much? What does it do for us that dialogue and movement alone cannot?

BELLAMY: Well, you know, boy that’s tough. We know that it has some sort of *affect* on us. It *does* something. We don’t know why. We don’t know why babies in the womb react to music, we don’t know anything about all that, but we know it *does* something, you know, and I think that it does something physical as well as emotional. I think that it does something to you, it gets your cells going or something, I don’t know. So, there’s that part of it. Again, though, many of these things are rituals and they have significance, and the act of performing them does something that is apart from the literal meaning of the act. We may not understand it, but there’s instance after instance in this play and in many others where once you start to perform it, it starts to change you, it works on you. For me, some of the most emotionally arresting and connecting places in this script are where that music is brought in to sort of sum up or to connect a whole bunch of stuff that’s been going on, or throw it into relief. These are the junctures where the *stuff* happens in the play, and music is, it’s evocative, it makes things happen. I chose the name Penumbra for the company because I like to *say it*, I like the way it makes me hum, you know? The *saying* of it does something. And so, that’s going on. Throw into that all the meaning of these things – you think about, “Oh, isn’t that rhythm fine?” [*sings with a metered, down beat*] “Hard times in old Virginia...Oh, in old Virginia.” You know? We could get off on that! But then you start thinking that, “Man, these cats are swinging hammers to that music.” And then all of a sudden it starts to take on another meaning and the act of it makes you understand it. It’s that thing being done. *Doing* the thing.

LEIN WALSETH: So, as always, I’ll end by asking you what you hope audiences will come away with? How do you hope they will be moved, changed, and transformed?

BELLAMY: I think that if we can complicate this relationship, it’s the best thing that we can do. This urge of Susannah’s to collect this music isn’t entirely altruistic, but it’s good. We wouldn’t have the blues had not Eric Clapton decided that they were worth something, because black folks would have moved on to something else and it would have morphed into the next moment in music. He tended to freeze it in time...but that’s a good thing. Maybe. It’s complicated, you know, and the more we can complicate that the better off we are.

The other thing that I’m trying to do with the play is to not separate the music from the people. Susannah wants to take this music and put it in the Library of Congress but the *people* are problematic [*laughs*] you know? You can’t separate them, nor can you even perform the songs without those people, they’re part of the same thing. Pearl’s worth in *performing* this stuff is just as important as the music itself. The act that created the work song is just as important as the work song. You can’t come into a culture and just pop your fingers [*snaps in time*]. You’ve got to take all of that cultural context with it. What Susannah is trying to do, in many cases, is to take that music out of its context. She recognizes the worth of saving it as an artifact, but the people are problematic. And we do that all the time. When you have to take all of those people along with you, that’s a different story, and I think that’s the worth of this piece: it makes you have to deal with those people.