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TWO OLD BLACK GUYS JUST SITTING AROUND TALKING

By Gus Edwards

Directed by Lou Bellamy

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Previews April 27 & 28

A Letter from the Education Director

Two Old Black Guys Just Sitting Around Talking is a deceptively complex play, certainly more dynamic than its modest title suggests. As evidenced by the title, there is an endearing self-consciousness to the piece that is immediately disarming. Yet beneath its charming veneer is a keenly crafted commentary on the terrors that accompany growing old in an urban environment. The playwright, Gus Edwards, gave little stage direction as to the setting of the play: “a park bench located in a park in any big city in the U.S.” which prompts an important question: as a country, how do we relate to the elderly? Are elders well integrated into our communities? Or, are they ostracized and segregated into their own? With retirement communities cropping up across the country, many retirees and seniors increasingly seek respite from the organized chaos of middle age with its stress of employment, homeownership, child-rearing and, ironically, planning for retirement. Questions about who has access to these communities and (when necessary) specialized care are ever present. Retirement has become a huge industry and with the cost of healthcare, prescriptions, insurance and living, aging can be very expensive indeed which raises questions about class and race, by extension.

These two characters, Henry and Abe, have been thrown together in the twilight of their lives and in the space between them on a park bench are all the ghosts of their respective pasts; regret, frustration, loss, loneliness. They do not like each other; in fact, they actually may hate one another, yet each needs the other. The journey then is finding those moments when their tenuous bond reveals pain, sorrow, shame, fear, need. They are perhaps some of the most intimately human characters to grace our stage. As we watch them sit, looking out at a world that has moved beyond their reach, a world that does not see or acknowledge them any longer, contemplating a man sitting alone upon a park bench becomes the most profound kind of poetry. We shake our heads and push the thought away, “not me, not the ones I love,” we tell ourselves. We are aware of our own mortality but *not right now*. That is the essence of this play: the tremendous fragility of life and, as Henry and Abe gaze up at a bird’s nest each day waiting for hatchlings to arrive, the eternal hope and joy to be found in every single day.

Within the African American community (and various other minority communities) local histories are shared most frequently through conversation, and record keeping is often comprised of checking with someone “who was there.” In this way elders remain important touchstones. Historically, this tradition allowed black people to retain cultural memory when black literacy was criminalized, and has offered an alternative narrative about American history and how things came to be as they are today. It personalizes history, helps listeners forge more intimate relationships with our collective past, while simultaneously resisting a tendency toward historical amnesia about race in this country. The title: *Two Old Black Guys Just Sitting Around Talking* has special historical significance for Americans. We come from a place where not so long ago every breath drawn by a black man was a revolutionary act, where black people, but especially black men were under siege. The fact that these two men have lived to be the age they are, in spite of the ravages of time, the immense stress borne in their bones by standing up just one more time against racism, against a society that saw them as its foremost enemy for over three hundred years, is quite a feat. They have lived through both “I have a dream” and “by any means necessary.” They saw Rosa Parks refuse to surrender her seat. They saw a black man be inaugurated as the 44th President of the United States. When one life can bridge the apparent gap between Rosa Parks and President Obama, it is vital that we listen.

So, in celebration of that tradition within the black community, the Education department has conducted a series of interviews with the artistic team about this play, Penumbra Theatre, and the contemporary moment in which we find ourselves. The transcripts of these interviews are below. I hope you enjoy reading them. While this is a different format

than our typical study guides, I think you will find the interviews both engaging and informative.¹

In addition, Lou Bellamy, James Craven, Abdul Salaam El Razzac and Gus Edwards will sit down with me to discuss the topical themes and issues raised by the play, its unique staging, the impetus for writing it and the lessons learned as it came together. As the director and actors have come to understand the play over the last four weeks of rehearsal, they have gained special insights that we are excited to share with you. This interview on the Penumbra stage will be videotaped and available via our website next week!

Sarah Bellamy, Education Director

¹ These interviews are part of a series of oral histories about Penumbra Theatre to preserve the legacy of this unique company. The archives will be available for patrons and students through the Archie Givens, Sr. Collection of African American Literature at the University of Minnesota.

Talking with the Director. . .

Two Old Black Guys Just Sitting Around Talking Director **Lou Bellamy** sat down for an interview with August Wilson Fellow Stephanie Lein Walseth to discuss his experience staging the world premiere. This is an excerpted transcript of that interview conducted on April 26, 2010 at Penumbra Theatre Company in St. Paul, Minnesota.

LOU BELLAMY: I've been very surprised by the play.

STEPHANIE LEIN WALSETH: How so?

LB: I thought it was a benign sort of *Grumpy Old Men* kind of thing and that is in there, but it's much more existential, it's way more thoughtful, more dangerous, more poignant than I imagined—it just unfolded for me. And the way it happened was, I kept trying to make it be that picture that we used for our promo of these two old guys laughing—it's such a wonderful picture and I think that's the way we would like old people to be, but they're not that. Or, they are that and more. They're still asking all the hard questions that we ask ourselves. You'd think that by that time they might have figured something out but they haven't. It turns out that the world is very dangerous for them, maybe as much as it is for young people today.

“They're so alone that the most they have in common with the world is with their enemy. So they're forced to reveal their deepest self to the person that they dislike the most. Now that is very, very deep.”

I spoke with Gus [Edwards, the playwright] about it. I just said “man I'm adrift here. I can't seem to find the key to this thing.” And he said to me, “these men really, *really* don't like each other. And I kept trying to make them cute and so forth, but the things were so hateful sometimes that they were saying. When I embraced that that they truly don't like each other, then I began to see my way through it. Then I went back and thought about some of his other writing that I've read, and I said Gus isn't playing games. He isn't being cutesie [*sic*] with this. Let's take this as it presents itself and we'll get on from there. It's still one of the most difficult projects I've taken on. It's tough.

SLW: Why, because it's not apparent?

LB: Right. It's not on the surface. He's a way better playwright than I thought, because the stuff just builds on its own. It begins to take on its own sort of reality

that these guys who don't like each other are left alone and they're so alone that the most they have in common with the world is with their enemy. So they're forced to reveal their deepest self to the person that they dislike the most. Now that is very, very deep. [Laughter] And that's where these two old guys are. They don't make up, but they recognize their interdependence and sort of strike a truce. Even then though, at the end when that seems to have happened, one of them says, "I loved her, you know," and they go right back to that woman again. You know? And I left it there. They do the toast and they just stare out at the audience and at the rest of the world, and that's where they are. They're not significantly different from when we found them, except they recognize the interdependence, but nothing is solved.

"This is a question of believing in the piece and unlocking it. I had never seen a play that turned out so differently than where I started out to try to guide it."

SLW: It sounds like *Waiting for Godot*.

LB: It does, doesn't it? It is just as poignant, I think, just as stark. It teaches us that that humanity can be found in anybody. This is a *Godot*, you know, but it doesn't pretend to be one. It doesn't sort of shadow Beckett and make the plays on the words and all that stuff. It is firmly ensconced in the black aesthetic, all the music is Miles [Davis] and [John] Coltrane. You can find yourself in these guys, and it's really sobering, I think. It's sobering for them too.

But it is funny, and it's funny without trying to be funny—I think, now I've seen it too many times and it isn't funny to me anymore, so this is where my craft and my experience tells me to stop tinkering with it. It was funny once and see what you'll do, is run past it as a director and you'll go, "I've got to make this funny again, it's not working." I've learned to stop. Hopefully I stopped in the right place—I wish you could see it .

SLW: Well I've stopped into rehearsal for short periods and watched it and it's just popping. I think the humor is definitely there.

LB: I hope so. We need an audience desperately.

SLW: With the two-handers especially, I would think.

LB: This is a question of believing in the piece and unlocking it. I had never seen a play that turned out so differently than where I started out to try to guide it. You

hear this crap about playwrights saying “I just followed the voices, and they wouldn’t do that,” you know? You’ve heard them say that and you go “oh, please.” Don’t you? You just want to stick your finger down your throat when you hear that. But, it happened to me. I tried and they just *wouldn’t* do it.

SLW: How was working with these people like Abdul Salaam El Razzac and Jim Craven, with whom who’ve you’ve had decades long relationships? What was the process like?

LB: We start out to ennoble black people. That’s what we start out to do. Now, that doesn’t mean that you “blackwash” or “whitewash” them, but you want to ennoble them. You want to *uncover* them. Not so that you can expose their short comings and make something of that, but so that you can show who they are, all of what they are. Then, you have to have the confidence that that’s going to be beautiful—it almost makes me want to weep. You will never find that beauty if you don’t believe in it. That’s why you need black directors, and black directors who care about themselves and are proud and loving and so forth. When you do that, these people open up like flowers. It never ceases to amaze me. But if you come into with a different kind of attitude and you don’t want to open that up in a loving kind of way, then you’ll find what your perception brought to it. Then you can burlesque it, you can make fun of it, you can tear it down, you can make it ugly, you can do all those things to it. All of them come from the same place. When you can *respect* it, it turns into something else.

SLW: What is the role of oral history in this play? We’ve talked in the past about the role of “signifying” in black culture; are they reliable narrators?

LB: I think all of that is present and you have to sort them out dramaturgically and make some sense out of it and it’s hard. They are lying, they are clearly lying in that mythical kind of way that especially black men do. There’s also a degree of senility operating in there. There’s honesty and one has to negotiate that tricky sort of terrain and still treat them seriously. I found out that there’s one place there that Jim talks about, as Abe, his knife. It becomes a mythical thing at one point - a blade, a machete. And he pulls it out and it’s this little bitty thing. Now that’s at one point. At another point when it’s dark and Abdul is out there, he

“They want that attachment. They *long* for it. It’s gone for them and they’ve got just each other. There, of course, is the brutal irony of the piece - what happens when everything else is gone and all you have is your enemy?”

comes out and he's walking like this when he sits down and talks to him he closes his knife. You could come up on that old man and he'd stick you. It's both - those things exist in the same body all the time.

These men are dressed well. They are not looking in garbage cans or anything like that. They have planned for retirement. They've both got apartments. They don't live in assisted living, so they've been able to maintain a degree of dignity. Still, this feeling of loss and abandonment bothers them to the point where they lie about it. "You ain't got nobody, I'm all you got." And one guy says, "No, I have someone. This young boy that I treat as my nephew." And it turns out that he's lying about it. They want that attachment. They long for it. It's gone for them and they've got just each other. There, of course, is the brutal irony of the piece - what happens when everything else is gone and all you have is your enemy?

"You can find yourself in these guys, and it's really sobering, I think. It's sobering for them too."

SLW: This play raises questions about what we do with the elders of our community, about where they live, how we care for them, and how we value them. How do you see the play speaking to these issues?

LB: That is the take that I had originally with the play, that that's mainly what the play is about - elders and how we treat them and all that. Certainly that is there, but I think the play makes a more existential statement. You can see that in the design, and I think Gus points to that. We've got a hill that the park bench sits on—an island—okay? [Laughter] It is a place where the real mettle can be tested and that's of course where you have Sartre and all those guys - "you are what you do when you're stressed, you're not who you are when it's nice and easy." And so, that's what's going on here. There are various interruptions that speak to that outside world and what's out there for them. We have a car bumping by with that growl and these guys have to stop what they're doing and watch. And the reference to kids/men playing basketball. And the threat that outside whenever they come to the park in the morning they start picking up trash, cleaning up their little area—

SLW: Is that in the script?

LB: No.

SLW: That's your direction?

LB: Yeah. It's about that outside world that impinges upon them. I tried to build that in there. Their time has kind of passed and they're attempting to live in a world in which there isn't a clear place for them and they can't make a place for themselves. I think that is true for anyone in the U.S. today. Our communities remain loving, caring, yet dangerous places. You cannot walk with immunity through those communities. I don't know that you can in any community.

SLW: What do you hope audiences will come away with?

LB: Well, that at this age we are still dealing with those eternal questions. I think, Stephanie, that we will never figure it all out—that's what it's all about. I don't mean to say that it's a treadmill. Perhaps it should be a celebration that we're still vital enough to ask those questions, I don't mean it cynically. We pass by an old person and think, "I know what that is." But they're still going at it. Maybe that will be worth it.

Talking with the Playwright. . .

Playwright **Gus Edwards** sat down for an interview with Education Director Sarah Bellamy to discuss his script *Two Old Black Guys Just Sitting Around Talking*. This is an excerpted transcript of that interview conducted on Thursday April 15, 2010 via telephone.

SARAH BELLAMY: I thought we could talk informally this morning about the play that we're getting ready to produce here at Penumbra, *Two Old Black Guys Just Sitting Around Talking*. This is going to be the first time it'll be produced, right? Up on its feet?

GUS EDWARDS: Yes, right. There's been a couple of readings but no full production.

SB: I was looking at the script and there are very minimal stage directions. In terms of setting, you write: "a park bench located in any park, any big city in the U.S." So you leave this really open for directors and designers to interpret your words, your work.

GE: I think because I used to be an actor for awhile, and you know the feeling was always "the best playwright is a dead one," because he wasn't there to interfere and be a pain in the ass. [Laughter] Frequently the playwright's presence is an encumbrance on the actors just saying "this line is stupid; I have no idea what this means," you know they're not going to do that with the playwright sitting there. So to give the people freedom to find the thing, because ultimately they're the ones who have to give it life of a certain kind, you know. And so usually I stay away from the process unless I'm directly asked to come in. I think one director is enough. And more often than not, some playwrights will attempt to direct through the director, you know, my experience has been that sometimes when I've sat in rehearsal—mostly at the Negro Ensemble Company—and I've seen something going wrong, after the rehearsal I would say something to the effect of (to Douglass Turner Ward if he's the one directing), I would say "well, Doug you know I think this actor is going in this direction wrong and I think this is what I meant." And Doug would invariably say to me, "Gus I know it, but he has to go

"When I'm working it's because the characters have arrested my attention in one way or another. . . finally I think, you should write this down."

that route in order to get around to here where he's going to get it right," and so then another side of my head would slap me and say shut up because you don't know how the process works, you're the writer. [Laughter]

SB: And in addition to being a writer, you're also a professor at Arizona State University. What do you teach?

GE: I teach film theory, you know, auteur theory, Eisenstein's theory of montage, things like that. I'm just about finished though, I'm retiring this year.

SB: You are?

GE: Yes this May, as a matter of fact. Any number of people look at me and say "well what are you going to do now?" as though I'm just going to sort of vegetate in a hammock somewhere and I say "well, you know I have any number of things. . ." Being a writer or just being creative individual I guess, I have more projects on my shelf than I will live to complete. And so I will have a good time doing that.

SB: Does your interest in film theory and sort of that cinematic world influence how you write or vice versa?

GE: I don't know. I came to playwriting after being involved with film because ever since I was a kid I was really captivated by film, movies, you know, all the possibilities and stuff. Not in an intellectual way, but sort of in an entertainment, practical way, you know. I went to the movies a lot. You know how people get involved with it. It seems like a wonderfully glamorous world. And then I got to America, you know—I come from St. Thomas in the Virgin Isles, that's where I'm from—so I got to America and then, I don't know through misadventure, I discovered that there was sort of an intellectual side to film you know, Bergman, and people like that. When I came to ASU, I actually came as a playwright in residence. There was some film being taught here. I used to sit and talk to the film teachers, especially one who kind of headed up the program, and he ultimately was leaving and they called me in and said, "what do you know about film?" and I said, "well I think I know more about film than I know about theatre." And so with that, I made the transition over.

"There's a whole wellspring of wisdom and experience and knowledge that we just don't tap into."

SB: I was wondering about setting it in any city, is that commentary on the idea that older folks in general are not being taken care of anywhere in America?

GE: I don't know. Subtextual elements like that in any of my plays, I would think the author is the last to know. You work from instinct, you know. I'm not sitting there deliberately saying "well, I want to make a commentary on old age." No, these characters, I mean the way I write anyway—I don't know how other people do it—when I'm working it's because the characters have arrested my attention in one way or another, and over the years they somehow talk to each other and then finally, finally I think you should write this down. When it's finished I think, okay, I'm done, thank you, breathe a big sigh of relief and put it away and go onto something else. When there's enough years of remove from it I would think that generally if I'm going to make a statement about what this play is about, I would think it's about sort of the terrors of getting older and being lonely. Effectively all the people that these two men knew who were friends of theirs died and they don't know each other and although their relationship is adversarial, in one way or another they wind up having to lean on each other for at least companionship.

"These guys are older than water! Damn, they seem to know everything!"

SB: Well I think that the actors are having a really good time and a good challenge.

GE: That's what I was saying to Lou, tell them to enjoy it because he was saying "boy, we're really working" and I said, "tell them I say to have fun."

SB: Yeah and I think they are. I think it's also a real great challenge for them too to need one another so much and keep that cantankerous relationship alive.

GE: Well good. We'll see what they do with it.

SB: Can you tell me a little bit about your youth and growing up? Were you around older folks and did they influence you?

GE: I grew up in St. Thomas, Virgin Isles and I got to the US in 1959. I was nineteen years old. When I was a kid we were always around adults; they weren't particularly older, when I say so, I think of it now, and I don't encounter kids the way we did like when we came from school. I went to a Catholic school and in my early teen years just walking home, we'd sit and talk to cab drivers. These were men in their mid-thirties early forties kind of thing, and they would tell us their value systems about everything, mostly cars and women, and stuff like that, and as kids we were thrilled to listen to all of this and adjust according to our point of view.

When you talk about the elderly, there were one or two people I knew when I was growing up who just seemed like, without formal education in other words PhD's or college degrees, had certain wisdoms that seemed to be universal about life, just because of the fact that they got to a certain age. They were philosophical or meditative about looking at the world and coming to some decisions about it. Some of the more intelligent things I've ever heard were from people like that, you see.

And you know, when you mention about the process of how we treat the elderly in this country I think I realized this very early in my teaching career anyway is that we don't utilize the wisdom of the elderly here at all we really treat them as discards—the discarded—off to the periphery of society and sort of told to make their way as best they could. There's a whole for me anyway there's a whole wellspring of wisdom and experience and knowledge that we just don't tap into. What I've seen is that in the African American communities the elderly that I've seen here and also in the islands, the elderly retain—a number of them, at least—a kind of vitality just through sometimes bravado, sometimes ego, sometimes just personality thrust, you know. They'll sit there, they'll argue, they'll involve themselves in athletics. I mean, boxing is a sport I look at and the fun I have with boxing isn't just watching the fighters in the ring but listen to the old timers who have seen every fight since as we say 'Adam came out of the Garden of Eden' and how they could tell you what's going to happen before it happens I will say "these guys are older than water! Damn they seem to know everything!" There is a vitality to that that for me gives these people a vividness and a sense of fun that I don't find in that many other people.

SB: I think that's definitely evident in the play particularly as these two men exchange barbs vocally. When they do try to get up on their feet and fight one another, they can't quite execute it. They are trying to hold onto their virility and masculinity and it comes out in interesting ways in the play. . .

GE: When I was growing up in the islands there were people who had one leg, one arm that kind of stuff and they were actually nicknamed that way, you know. So we would say, "half-legged so-and-so," "one-armed-so and so." So the people knew up front that's the way they were, and these were men—and I'm speaking of men now—these were men who were married sometimes more than once, had two or three children or five children. The very fact that they were physically handicapped in that way they weren't sensitive about it. I remember women, some of these guys would stand on the corner and make moves on these women and the women would say "I wouldn't go out with a man who don't have two legs," and the man would say "well you see I may not have two legs but I got something else as a substitute," you know what I'm saying? Subsequently he wasn't sitting in the corner saying "oh, I'm being rejected because I only have

one leg,” you see what I’m saying? He’d built up defenses that gave him entrance into the society to the point where he was fully functioning, as I said these guys got women, they did all the stuff that everyone else did. It was like, instead of having brown eyes you have blue eyes, you see.

SB: If we could switch gears a bit, Mr. Edwards, I’d like to ask you, as a writer coming out of the Black Arts Movement, when you think about the future of theatre—particularly African American theatre—what do you see?

GE: First of all I think we need to sustain the institution to do work in general. I hear talk all the time about some sort of canon of African American plays but my feeling is—and this is just my own personal feeling I can’t speak for anyone else—is that I wouldn’t attempt to deliberately select certain work I think posterity does that. What I think is needed is more work being produced. Then quality work will yield themselves to the top, the others will disappear and sort of peter out in some way or another. Saying this, I know any number of playwrights my own colleagues, peers, from that time at the NEC who won awards, I mean it wasn’t like they were just done at the NEC because the company had a bias for them. Charles Fuller he won the Pulitzer Prize and you can’t find his work anywhere and I know he writes. I have a couple copies of the plays he’s written since that time. I can go down the whole list: Phillip Hayes Dean, Paul Carter Harrison, I mean could just keep going with a list of people who wrote what I thought was real quality work, but the work was not sustained. More than that, they were never encouraged to continue being prolific—one or two people were selected out of that were being produced on a regular basis and anointed to sort of to represent the entire spectrum of the African American experience of this time through the theatre.

SB: There’s not a diversity of voices?

GE: Not at all. The way writers develop, it’s like a mountain range sometimes; you have high points and sometimes you have low points, but you have to be *constantly* produced and encouraged. I mean, I look at the Anglo playwrights and frequently I see a playwright who has written one play that is considered pretty good, and their career gets sustained and sustained and sustained and I don’t see that happening to the African American playwright. You ask why? I think there’s a twofold reason: one is we don’t have a black theater network to pick

“The way writers develop, it’s like a mountain range sometimes; you have high points and sometimes you have low points, but you have to be *constantly* produced and encouraged.”

the plays up and give them life; the other side of that is the white theatres don't pick them up either. In the classes I used to teach –theatre classes here at ASU— sometimes just to be provocative I would mention a Charles Fuller play and they would look blankly to me and I would say, “he won the Pulitzer Prize! He didn't win the *black* Pulitzer Prize, he won *the* Pulitzer,” because I knew that society would discount it if it was called the black Pulitzer Prize, you see what I'm saying? He won the same one that David Mamet won, that Sam Shepard won, that Wendy Wasserstein won, and they know who they are but they don't know who Charles Fuller is. The same thing with Joseph Walker, he won the Tony award, didn't win the *black* Tony award, he won *the* Tony. But they still don't know who he is. Doug Turner Ward, who I speak to sometimes about this, he calls it “instant amnesia” that the society has about its black artists. If that's going to happen, then we have to nurture new ones each time, but it's like reinventing all of the telephone, the automobile, every time out. It's nice that theatres like Penumbra sustain black playwrights but we need more of that. That's my feeling.

Talking with the Cast. . .

Founding Penumbra Theatre Company Member **Abdul Salaam El Razzac** sat down for an interview with August Wilson Fellow Stephanie Lein Walseth to discuss how his experience playing “Henry” in *Two Old Black Guys Just Sitting Around Talking*. This is an excerpted transcript of that interview conducted on April 14, 2010 at Penumbra Theatre Company in St. Paul, Minnesota.

STEPHANIE LEIN WALSETH: So, the first question I have for you is what about this piece made you agree to sign on?

ABDUL SALAAM EL RAZZAC: Because it’s two old black guys just sitting around talking.

SLW: [Laughter] And that appealed to you?

ASR: Yes - one of the first leads that I had at Penumbra was in a Gus Edwards play *The Offering* and I worked on it again in Los Angeles. So, I jumped at the chance to do another one of his plays because I like his work.

SLW: When was that?

ASR: Good question.

SLW: [Laughter] A while ago.

ASR: Yeah, Claude directed it. Claude Purdy.

SLW: What about that piece was intriguing for you?

ASR: The characters, the darkness of it, the storyline. It’s just a good solid piece of work. Old people versus youth, you know.

SLW: Seems like a continuous theme in Edwards’ work. Did you meet him during that process?

ASR: No I didn’t. When I was in Arizona I thought I would get the chance to meet him, but I didn’t. Everybody I know knows him, so I feel like I do, but I don’t.

SLW: What do you know of him?

“It’s not always your friends that’ll help you get through things. You’re forced by adversity to make it.”

ASR: I know he's a professor and he's a playwright and I like his work.

SLW: And when you said Arizona, when you were in Arizona and you thought you might meet him, what was happening there?

ASR: We were doing a *Jitney* tour for Arizona Theatre Company.

SLW: Was that in conjunction with a Penumbra production?

ASR: It was the Penumbra production in conjunction with Arizona Theatre Company and Kansas City Rep.

SLW: Because this play is so much about getting to know one another through storytelling, I wonder if you could tell us about how you came to Penumbra and how you came to this group of folks that you're working with.

ASR: I came to it from day one, as one of the founding members. I came to the stage actually before I came to Penumbra because I was doing productions in the theatre here when it was just the Hallie Q. Brown stage, and I was fortunate enough to be one of the first actors hired when Penumbra was started. And the rest is history, so they say.

SLW: I think I saw somewhere—were you a student at the University of Minnesota?

ASR: Yeah.

SLW: Is that how you met Lou?

ASR: No, I met Lou before I was a student. Matter of fact, it was Horace Bond and Lou who talked me into going out to the U. I knew Lou because I had done a couple productions for him on this stage, and a couple touring shows to penitentiaries, and a production at Theatre in the Round. So my experience with him as an actor acting with him and him directing me was a few years before Penumbra started. So we had a working relationship before then. I was teaching at the Performing Arts Learning Center which later moved into Central High school. The program that Jan Mandell has is an offshoot of the program I started. I was going through a divorce, and decided I was going to quit and go back to theatre. They told me it would be a good experience for me if went out to the U, so I did.

SLW: This is a little tangential to the questions here, but now I'm curious about what that conversation was like. Since you'd already worked together and Penumbra was going to be starting, what was that moment like? What was that formation like?

ASR: That's a good question, that's a good question and it's a lot of decades ago, so my "rememberances" [sic] might not coincide with his "rememberances" [Laughter]. I just remember coming over and saying I wanted be a part of the company and we had a conversation and I got the job.

SLW: Cool. And I know in the beginning of the company there were about twenty folks or so who were paid full time, as full-time artists, were you one of those?

ASR: Oh yes.

SLW: Okay, so you had a salary.

ASR: Right. Off of the CETA grant which I can't remember what CETA stood for, but that was the first money that came in to sustain us.

SLW: I think it's the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act.

ASR: Ah, thank you!

SLW: Sure. [Laughter] So, coming to this present moment, how do you think that this play exemplifies Penumbra's mission to illuminate the human condition through the prism of the African American experience? How do you think this production might be particularly marked by Penumbra's approach?

"You know, in life all old black men aren't alike. The only thing that they share is being old and black."

ASR: That's one of those questions that's really difficult for me to answer, since I'm still in the process of finding out exactly what our human condition is in *this* production. Other than two old men meeting there on the same day, sitting all day long, not liking each other, what's the story? How did this happen? And that's in keeping with Penumbra's credo to examine different aspects of, you know, black life in this country from all standpoints, not just from the drama of it.

SLW: Since you brought up the idea of these guys'- Henry and Abe's - friendship, let me add a follow up to that. I know you're still working through it, but right now what is your sense of their friendship? Do you think that there's depth there? Do you think that there's any reciprocity? Do they really hate each other, or do they need each other, or is it both?

ASR: Both. They hate each other but they need each other. Symbolically, it's like the last man on earth, because everybody they know is gone or has moved on one way or another. They've moved on through life and left them behind or died and

they really don't like each other so it's sort of a family friendship. You know how they say "you can pick your friends but you can't pick your relatives"? There's people in your family that you just can't stand, but you're around them. That's the way they are, it's sort of a family dynamic, you know, it's just them. But they can't stand each other for various reasons, which is a good glimpse into the human spirit and how one makes it through the day or through life. It's not always your friends that'll help you get through things. You're forced by adversity to make it.

"These two men survived decades of oppression, and have done whatever had to be done at the time to get to this point."

SLW: So speaking of long time friendships, you and Jim [Craven] have worked together for a long time. How might you describe your relationship working together at Penumbra? Do you think that this production has presented a stretch for the two of you or is kind of like old shoes?

ASR: Definitely. It's never going to be old shoes. Regardless of the production, it's never going to be old shoes. If it is, I'll quit. It has to be something challenging. It has to be something that moves you ahead as an actor. I was telling Lou that since I've been playing so many old men lately [laughter] that my main concern was that it's not the old man that you saw in *Gem[of the Ocean]* and it's not the old man that you saw in *Radio Golf*. That's an easy trap that you can fall in as an actor once you start playing these types of characters. You know, in life all old black men aren't alike. The only thing that they share is being old and black. You just have to be really careful and not make it old hat—to know that this is a completely different character from the last two that I did here.

SLW: Does that make it more of a challenge then - working people like Jim and Lou that you've known for so long—to find the new angle, the new relationship, the new dynamic?

ASR: It gets to the point that I trust in Lou as a director, and that I expect him to say "No, that's the same character you did before." So, my job as an actor is to make sure I don't hear that coming from him. So, yeah, it makes it more challenging because I know the director's challenge is not to direct this the same way he directed me before. He's directing me entirely differently, the same way I try to bring a different perspective to the work and present a different character, he has to direct me in a different way too, because it is a different play and a different character.

SLW: So what unique nuances are you finding with this character that might be different?

ASR: He's not a nice person. [Laughter] You know? It's a fun character to play because at the same time you have to present that 'feeling side' for the audience to be able to be sympathetic to him even though he's not nice and a lot of the things he says and does are not nice. It's about finding out why he's like that. And once you get off into that mindset, it's not so much that I sympathize with that character because I'm becoming him, it's about being able to project something in him so that people can see some kind of truth, so that they can understand why he's the way he is or why they're the way they are.

“If you're out and there's a group of younger men around you, you have to make sure that you don't limp or show any pain or anything, to show that you're still virile.”

SLW: Given that this is a contemporary piece, what do you think it reveals about the state of black America these days?

ASR: Now we're being philosophical here. [Laughter] Survival. These two men survived decades of oppression, and have done whatever had to be done at the time to get to this point. They had to be able to change or deal with whatever came up, and where they were and how they dealt when they were 16 or 17 had to change through the decades because of the changes in society and the change in mores. I heard a friend of mine tell me one time—he's older than I am—that during Obama's inauguration when the cameras cut to a lot of the old school black politicians and Civil Rights leaders who were crying, it wasn't so much that they were crying because they saw a black president, they were crying because their time had passed. So we're dealing with two men whose time has passed but they're still here. So what do they do?

SLW: This ties to something that you brought up earlier, which I think is really prevalent in this piece – the tension between elders and youth, between different generations. I wonder if this tension we see in this play, over questions like: How do we deal with our elders? Where do they go? What do we do with them when their time has passed? Is this something unique to black communities or if it extends across racial and cultural lines?

ASR: Yes it does. Especially here in this country, because even the cultures here that used to value the aged don't, because they've become Americans and the culture dictates that for the most part we throw out old folk. They're not—what's the word I'm looking for—revered. So, I think the more plays and the

more books, literature, or media that deal with the older people in our society, the better.

SLW: One of the other themes that seems evident to me in this piece is about the performance of masculinity. It seems very important to these men as they boast about boxing fights and knife fights and work to prove their independence and their abilities and charms with the ladies. I wonder if you have any thoughts about whether this is particular to these men or to this generation?

ASR: You can turn on TV and see that the whole masculine thing is still there. You go to Sunday newspapers and turn to the business pages, there's all these implants for men. You turn on the TV and there's all these Viagra and Cialis commercials, because until you die, you know, masculinity - you've got to be that. They say that the pendulum swings, and at a certain point you become invisible to women in a certain age group. Then when they age, you become visible again. The whole point is that you're covering up your gray, you're going to the gym and working out, you're buying sports cars, you have eye candy or a trophy wife on your arm, and it's all about maintaining that masculine image. And the older you get, it transfers to how you deal in society. You don't want to show any weakness because weakness shows that you're not masculine. If you're out and there's a group of younger men around you, you have make sure that you don't limp or show any pain or anything, to show that you're still virile. I think these characters are dealing with a lot of that themselves, and that's why one of the characters is always talking about his life and what he will do. It is why and they always have asides about 'them young kids.' It's projection and protection.

“Isn't it grand? You only remember the things you want to remember.”

SLW: That's an interesting way of looking at it. In terms of content and form, this play does a remarkable job of playing with memory - of what's remembered and what is lost, the malleability of events, and notions of the 'truth.'

ASR: Isn't it grand? You only remember the things you want to remember.

SLW: Do you think that is a result of the men's age in this play? Or might it be the playwright playing with the audience's ability to pin down what actually happened?

ASR: I think it's more to do with age. They are remembering things the way they want to remember. Either way it's playing with the audience, because it's about "did this really happen?" Or, with my character, "is he confusing different incidents with each other?" The older you get, the more people mention things like, "oh,

that didn't happen *there*, it happened over *here*." That's why I love that line about "you remember the things you want to remember."

SLW: So, what for you is at the heart of this play and what do you hope audiences come away with? How might they be moved, changed or transformed?

ASR: I don't know, Stephanie, I don't *know*. [Laughter] That they saw two old black guys sitting around talking and got something out of it. How many times have you gone and seen these old dudes sitting around on park benches? I've found from my experience, if you go some place and see a young couple or two young women sitting together or two young men sitting together, I don't think people wonder what they're talking about. But you see older people sitting out, and you think, "oh, wow! It'd be interesting to know what they're talking about. They've lived so long. What is this conversation? What are they talking about?" So with these two guys you find out. It goes back to when we used to seek out older people, not so much because they were that much wiser - for the most part age does not transfer into wisdom - but it was because you could pick up some knowledge, you could pick up how to deal with certain situations. There's nothing new under the sun, everything's been done before, so we used to seek out the old people and sit down and talk to them and listen to them and pick their brains and pick up some kind of experience or knowledge about something. Now, it's just, "I wonder they're talking about? I wonder what's on his mind." But do we go find out?

SLW: So this play gives us a chance to do that?

ASR: Yes, whether you like what's on their mind or not. [Laughter] And hopefully some knowledge can be picked up from them, from their experience. There's nothing else that explains why they are the way they are. Instead of saying "That evil old woman or that evil old man down the street..." we might ask, "Why are they like that?" Instead of thinking they're evil if they say "Boy, get off my grass, you're on my grass, I'll call the police!" we can ask "Why are they like that?" [Laughter]

I don't know. I'm just an actor, what do I know? [Laughter] When you get us - Gus and Lou and Jim and I - all together in one spot for this conversation, our individual thoughts will probably transfer into something.

SLW: Yes, I think so. I think it will be a neat overlapping—something someone says will spark something for someone else—

ASR: And then you'll have four old black men sitting around talking [Laughter]

SLW: Yeah, we'll have to cut you off because you'll be able to talk for hours!

ASR: [Mimicking] "No *that's* not the way it was, it went like *this!*" [Laughter]

SLW: Exactly. Well thank you so much.

ASR: No, thank you.

Talking with the Cast. . .

Veteran Penumbra Theatre Company Member **James Craven** sat down for an interview with Education Director Sarah Bellamy to discuss how his experience playing “Abe” in *Two Old Black Guys Just Sitting Around Talking*. This is an excerpted transcript of that interview conducted on April 28, 2010 via telephone.

SARAH BELLAMY: So, I’m curious, when you first heard about the play, what were your first impressions? Had you read it before?

JIM CRAVEN: No, I had not. Well, my first impression was that I had a good feeling about it because it was a Gus Edwards piece. I’m familiar with two other of his pieces – one is *Louie and Ophelia*, which I’ve done before, and the other I can’t remember the name of, but it’s a play that I really, really like and I don’t know that it’s ever been done. I think Dominic [Taylor] said it was done at the Pittsburgh City Players Theatre relatively recently. I think it’s his latest play, actually, and I really like it a *lot*. I mean, I thought this play was *really, really* off the charts good.

SB: Cool.

JC: So, and we did that as a reading or a workshop or something last year. And so when Lou said we were going to do another one of Gus’s plays, I got really excited. I just like the way he – I like his sense of humanity and human beings’ foibles, and I like the fact that he likes to put people out there, just as they are. So, I liked it a lot. And no, I did not read the play before. I mean, I read it before we went into rehearsal, but I didn’t read it when it was announced in the season. I didn’t go “who!” and go read it right away. I read it a week or two weeks before we went into rehearsal. Might have been more than that, actually, ‘cause it seems like I had known about it for a while. I like his work, so I read it.

SB: So, what would you say this play is about?

JC: I would say that it’s about two elderly gentlemen that are in the middle age of old age, and they are going through the middle age crisis of old age. Where they’re at at this point in time at the start of this play, is at a point in their life in which everybody they know is dying or dead and all they have left is each other. Now, they have never gotten along in the past, as a matter of fact they come from two entirely different intellectual, emotional places, and somehow or another they have decided that what they are going to do is to try to somehow

work it out because they know that all they've got is each other. That's what I would say that the play is about.

SB: What about it has been challenging or appealing to you?

JC: Well, challenging is the fact that, I don't know Gus, I don't know if this is the case, Lou just told me that he's a gentleman from the Caribbean islands and like many writers he writes as he speaks, and so consequently his syntax is not one that is native to me. So, speaking his lines and saying his phrasing and making it my own was challenging.

SB: Interesting.

JC: It's just a little bit different attack on things, and the choice of certain words and how to phrase things or responses, you know. Where I might say "You think so?" if somebody asks me a question, my response might be "You think so?" Gus' response is "You think not?" You know, it's just little things like that that kind of throw me a little bit.

Other than that, I would say trying to recreate, trying to create somebody and understand a person's age that is in their mid-seventies – I'm twenty years younger than that. That means to say that I don't have an understanding of where they are, emotionally and intellectually and spiritually or anything. But, if I take my own experience of where I am right now and kick it back to 40-45 years old and think about what I was thinking about then, or how I saw myself and my stuff then, that's how I proceeded with the character. So, in other words, I know that right now, my physical condition doesn't allow me to do the same things I was doing 10-15 years ago, however, that doesn't stop me from thinking that I still can. So, consequently when I built Abe, I built him on the idea that Gus said that he was a former boxer and trying to hang on to not just the memory of being a pretty good boxer when he was in his 20s, but actually trying to maintain a training regimen of some sort, and not being able to be the man that he thinks he is in his mind. Reality won't let him be. You know what I mean? So, that thing drives a lot of fear and self-doubts about what one thinks about oneself, at any age has trouble facing up to. You know? I mean, look at yourself. Sarah. Look at yourself and think about the girl that swam on the team in high school. Where is that girl?

SB: [Laughs] Oh, I think she's probably still in the pool.

JC: [Laughs] She's probably still in the pool, but she's not sitting there with you right now.

SB: [Still laughing] No, she's certainly not.

JC: But in your mind, when you get in the water and you're having fun, you're going "Gol-ly!" You know what I mean?

SB: Yeah, I do. I think that's a really good explanation for it. It's interesting, too, to think about how people might perceive older people, and what that means when you have to embody an older person as a character without making them a caricature.

JC: Exactly. Exactly. And this is the thing, and it's what I told Marianne Combs yesterday. She said "What would you want the audience to take away from this?" and I said, probably just a greater understanding, when you look in the grocery store and there's somebody pushing a cart along or they're kind of in your way or they're standing up there counting out their pennies in front of you and you're really impatient and you have all this youth and exuberance of "I need to get on with my life," and this old person is holding you up from, you know, from what? You know, they're holding you up from eventually getting to where they are. That's all it is.

"You know, this story could be a couple of old Jewish guys, a couple old Arab guys, it could be a couple of Eskimos sitting up on an ice floe and everyone on the ice floe's dead."

SB: Yeah. That's brilliant. You know, you are described, I was just reading the other day, Quinton Skinner put out something about the preview and he was talking about you and Abdul and Penumbra actors, and your name is really synonymous with the theatre in terms of just being an exemplar person of this style, a creator of it. How do you think this play speaks to Penumbra's mission to illuminate the human condition through the prism of the African American experience?

JC: Just by it being a play by an African descendant about life in America speaks to the mission right there. But you know what I think is even more important than that, well, not more important but a side thing that has come about, not real recently, but it's becoming clearer that this is what we're doing now, the set piece in the back that is that reddish-blond brick building, you know, I don't even know what the name of that kind of stone is that they're re-creating, but that building's a representation of [Clarence] Cap Wigington's architecture, that was the flagstone that he used in his architecture. An African American architect in St. Paul in the 1940s and 30s. Now, where we are in the mission now is not just to grab ahold of an African American playwright, and look at the African American condition in America. This has now morphed into an entire study of

greater depth. So, it goes into the architecture. I would imagine at some point in time, at least I'm hoping, that we really almost...we spend a lot of time using music that we all like, you know, and that is recognizable to a lot of people – Miles Davis, John Coltrane and folks like that – but other artists that lived *here*, I think we should see how we can use that music. You know, 'cause Charlie Parker lived here. Lester Young lived here. Ahmad Jamal lived here for a very long time. Captain Jack McDuff still lives here (I think, if he's still alive). These were all huge jazz giants that had major hits and so on and so forth that stretched over time. I'd like to see more of that being incorporated into our fabric. If we grab the architectural styles, if we grab the music, and things like that, just to make it a total immersion into the experience. Other than that I don't know what else to say. I mean, yeah, we do African American works by African American writers.

SB: Sure. And I think what you just described is showing that it's more than that. It's Afrocentric. It's putting black people and that frame of reference right at the center, so the world is really looking from that perspective. You know what I mean?

JC: Exactly. Exactly. From every angle. Not just in the words that are said.

SB: Do you think this play says anything about the state of black America, or black people in America?

JC: No, I don't. I don't think there's anything specifically that says...it actually has more of a universal theme to it in the sense of everybody gets old, everybody's going to die. And that is what the common experience is. Everybody's going to get old, everybody's going to die at some point in time. That's universal. The only, what makes it unique to us as opposed to anybody else is that it's kind of funny to look at what a couple of old black guys go through as they try to put things together. You know, this story could be a couple of old Jewish guys, a couple old Arab guys, it could be a couple of Eskimos sitting up on an ice floe and everyone on the ice floe's dead. You know what I mean? And the two of them are trying to figure out, okay, who's going to go get the seal for us to eat tonight? You know what I mean?

SB: So, the aging. The aging is universal.

“I kind of think that's what we do in our work in the theater, in African American theater – we provide celebration and laughter as well as the real thing that's going on.”

JC: Yeah.

SB: But there are cultural elements too. I was writing about the play, and you look back at these men's lives, they have lived through—the way I phrased it was—“both through ‘I Have a Dream’ and ‘By any means necessary,’” and they've seen a black man be elected to the White House...

JC: Even more than that they've...yeah, they've seen all those changes. I talked about that at length yesterday with Marianne Combs, you know, I said my grandmother, I often reflect over the fact that my grandmother said to me when I took her to the airport so she could get on a plane for the very first time in her life when she was 86 years old, she laughed about it and said “When I was young there was no such thing as planes.” You know what I mean? That wasn't even a thing. We live in a culture right now where there's all this enormous change that has gone on and it's not just the social change of the ‘I Have a Dream,’ ‘By any means necessary,’ Jim Crow, all that stuff, yeah all that stuff has happened and is unique to our culture that is for sure, but then the technology that has moved everything else along for everybody is a huge, huge thing.

But the one thing that I have to say about it is, as much progress as there has been made in the social realm, it has not kept pace with the technology, simply because you still have these Tea Baggers and John Birch-ers and KKK and white supremacists and all kinds of other stuff – the same cats doing the same thing that they were doing in the 1920s are still thinking the same shit right now, 90 years later. Trying to suppress and intimidate and terrorize people of color. And if they're not doing it to black folk they're doing it to Mexican folk. You know what I mean? It's the same thing. So that's like a never ending kind of thing. But we people of color pulled through all that, you know, we've pulled through a *lot* of stuff, we've pulled through all of it. Yesterday somebody was talking about laughter, how important laughter is in the African American culture...I know what it was, I was listening to, this past weekend on American Roots they were talking to The Meters, which was a New Orleans funk band in the 1960s that the Neville Brothers came out of, they were originally, some of them were in this band. They were talking about how in New Orleans it was a very oppressive environment and so music and dancing and celebration was the only thing that could keep people sane. That's why zydeco and dancing kind of music...you may have lost family members just the week before to lynching and mutilation and atrocities, and you're mourning that, but the only way you're going to get

“[Abe] thinks that he can ward off an attack from the young animals who want to feed on the weak and the helpless.”

through it is by having some laughter and celebration in the New Orleans style of funerals. I thought that was a really poignant position to take. I kind of think that's what we do in our work in the theater, in African American theater – we provide celebration and laughter as well as the real thing that's going on.

SB: One of the moments in the play that is so striking to me is when Henry and Abe are in their park bench area and that base comes through, and this car is going by, obviously some young kid, and how menacing it feels. What are you thinking, as your character, when you guys both stop and follow that car? What are you interacting with?

JC: I'm interacting just like I'm sitting on my old porch and the young gangsters come by with the bumping music and the heavy base and the violent lyrics and stuff like that, and I look at my granddaughter playing the front yard and think..."Wow. I hope that they don't go there." I have a personal relationship on the other side of that, of the people in the car playing the music too. You know? So I have all kinds of mixed emotions about that kind of thing. In the character up there, Abe is the guy that still thinks that he can fight them. He thinks he has the physical capabilities to actually ward off an attack.

"Everybody dies, it's just a matter of when. And if you're not dead yet, it's just not your time. That is the truth, the absolute truth."

SB: And he carries a knife, right?

JC: And he carries a knife. And he thinks that he can ward off an attack from the young animals who want to feed on the weak and the helpless, that not only want to but do. And they do it all the time. It's a reality. I don't know. What do you make of the kid that was trying to shoot the other kid and then shot that girl, Tyesha Edwards over here a block from my house? What do you make of that? What do you make of Malcolm X's grandson starting the fire that killed Betty Shabazz? You know? What is that? Is that peculiar to our people? I think not because it happens to all people, all the time, all around the world. It's the craziness of human beings and how they manifest themselves. And some people have more of that craziness going on, some cultures have more of that craziness because of the conditions that they're put in. Everybody knows that the crime rate is much higher, black on black crime, or Mexican on Mexican crime, is always much higher if they're living in an oppressed, poverty-stricken environment. That's just the nature of the thing. But it's never addressed that way, it's always addressed in terms of race.

SB: Right. As if it's only just that.

JC: Right. It's what I call the Utah argument. The way that Utah has set that whole thing up, if you only let in white people who believe in the same religion here, we'll have a perfect society. Well, if that's the case, how do you end up with that Gary Gilmore and all of these other dudes running around kidnapping children and taking them off and raping them and killing them and throwing them in the desert? Those are Mormons too. Those are white Mormons. So what happened to your perfect society? You know what I mean? And those people have money. I'm not saying that they all have money, but maybe the people that don't have money, that don't have access to all the stuff that they need – the health care, the mental health care, good jobs, you know, whatever within the context of their community – so they feel freaked out and do these terrible things. I don't know what the reason is, but I know it doesn't have anything to do with race. That, I do know.

SB: What is at the core of this play? What is its truth?

JC: The truth in the play is the line, "Everybody dies, it's just a matter of when. And if you're not dead yet, it's just not your time." That is the truth, the absolute truth. The play is about life. I mean, you can't just skip through the roses and think "Oh, golly, I'm going to live forever" when the play is about a couple of old guys dying. You know what I mean? Now, you can look at that as dark and nihilistic if you want to, but the fact of the matter is that they've found comfort with themselves, they found comfort with each other, so that they can go through the natural life progression of ending one's life not alone. And that's a good thing. That's a positive thing.