

LANAIRE ADEREMI

'an evening with verse writer'

'an evening with verse writer' is a play of poetry, music and art inspired by Audre Lorde's Line 'your silence will not protect you' The play took place on the 6th of April at the Shop Front Theatre in Coventry.

My aim for the show was to educate as many people as possible about Black history and the importance of community theatre. In the months leading up to the show, I critically observed family gathering dynamics, religious gatherings and social gatherings such as parties and intimate concerts. This observation was useful in deciding how I would arrange the black box studio as well as how I would interact with the audience as a performer. This observation combined with my study of African theatre, which is typically interactive and participant-focused informed my decision to interact consistently with my audience during my show. The show began with I (the orator) excited to 'tell my story' and reminding the audience that some of these stories have been 'murmured and whispered' so is my duty and theirs to spread the word about them. I was particularly pleased by how interactive the audience was during moments like these – silent when necessary and engaging in protests and loud bursts of excitement when required. During a performance of a poem about 'childhood' where I asked the audience to 'turn to their neighbour' and share a childhood memory, I noticed people spoke freely to each other. This was particularly evident by the attention given when what was private and personal memory before my show became public and collective memory. It is one of the reasons I believe my show was successful in addressing the theme of memory – its loss and misremembrance.

Each poem flowed into the other recounting memorable stories (personal, cultural and collective) and forgotten histories. Set in a creative living room space filled with books and collectibles that have contributed to Black knowledge production, this project explored my creative journey and discovery of my own culture. During the slow display of my books, objects and collectibles, I noticed the smiles on the audience's faces as some recognised some of my favourite books. It is this recognition followed by reflection that elicited the smiles and conversations after the performance.

My project explores the loss of memory – forgetting and misremembering. Through a narrative of my journey to writing and discovering many unheard voices and histories, this project recounted the importance of speaking when told to be silent. By performing poetry, an art form that Black women use to tell stories, the project highlighted the importance of this oral form of art which is valuable for culture and for preserving history.

'an evening with verse writer' was inspired by Black women like myself who continue to tell their story despite challenges. The project first started as a short performance at a scratch night in the Helen Martin Studio at the Warwick Arts Centre where I performed 10 mins of poetry and incorporated theatrical elements of slow movement and drama. Ideas such as slowly showing the audience objects and books by people that inspire me aimed to challenge a literary canon that has relegated works by Black women and men to the periphery. I was extremely delighted that a simple idea of performing poetry could be

transformed to a 45 min long set of poetic theatre that appealed to a wide range of audience.

I particularly enjoyed the process leading up the show: from researching about my favourite artists to observing people to making notes of theatrical productions I had seen in the months leading up to the show which were highly influential in how I combined music, images and poetry.

Working with a live band was especially fun for me. I think it is a great gift to be able to merge not just genres but different kinds of sounds and meanings together without losing artistic integrity. With the help of a great band comprising of a jazz vocalist, a saxophonist and pianist I was able to lace my poetry with music by creating a powerful sonic landscape.

Collaboration, sharing and co-production of knowledge was integral for the success of this show. I am glad that through this process, I had a community of people I could trust and learn from. Through the sharing of a poster for an 'artistic callout' I was able to attract artworks by artists from various parts of the country such as Coventry, London and Leeds. I was also able to work with an excellent set designer and production assistants who brought my vision life.

At the end of my performance, I received a standing ovation and an Artistic Development Award. Since then, I have been recently programmed by the Warwick Arts Centre for another re-run of the show on the 2nd and 3rd of October.