

Finding Jimmy, *Waiting for Giovanni*

Jewelle Gomez

...in the dream play the imagination spins and weaves new patterns, a blending of memories, experiences, free inventions, absurdities and improvisations.

August Strindberg¹

A decade ago, when my dear friend, Harry Waters, Jr., asked me to write something about James Baldwin I thought he meant a monologue he could use as an actor. When he clarified—he wanted a full play—I was totally intimidated,

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confused, and bereft. I had no idea how I'd approach writing about such an extraordinary life and career, that I'd admired since I first read his work when I was a teenager in the 1960s.

A short time later, by pure happenstance, I was a "plus one" at a dinner hosted by an esteemed book publisher and made shy by the conversation swirling around me about famous, mainstream, white writers and editors. In a conversational pause one of the diners, attempting to be polite to the obvious outsider, asked what I was working on. When I said I was hoping to write a play about James Baldwin the gentleman's face lit up as if he'd caught fire from within. It turned out he had been an editor of Baldwin's work and was brimming with a wealth of stories, which he told with immense warmth and admiration for Baldwin personally as well as for his writing and politics.

The one moment when sadness crept into his voice was his recollection of how hurt he felt Baldwin was by the admonitions from friends and activists not to publish his novel *Giovanni's Room* (1953). Its raw revelations about sexual desire among men as well its condemnation of the class prejudices which threaded through the story unsettled more than one critical reader and friend.

Immediately a door into my play about Jimmy flew open with a resounding crash. I understood all he might have experienced: the uncertainty about the validity of his own feelings about himself as well as about his writing. After all I had experienced similar challenges from activists in 1991 questioning my daring to write a Black, lesbian vampire novel. Fears that the story would denigrate the Black or lesbian communities were still fresh and strong more than thirty years after Jimmy defied his opposition.

Even though we know how the story ends, I knew the tensions that sparked his path could be frightening and worth exploring. I sensed Jimmy beside me as I imagined what it must have been like as a very young, Black writer to feel a passionate, revealing story bursting from his heart. At the same time, he knew he was called on to "represent"; to shine a positive light on oppressed brethren. How his professional insecurity might have affected his relationship with his white, European lover was another layer of tension in the story that propelled it forward as I wrote.

With that in mind, and an understanding that I could, as Strindberg wrote, "let my imagination spin and weave new patterns," I set out to present to today's audience a new side of Jimmy: young, sexual, passionate, anxious, yet determined to be true to himself. With my friend Harry's dramaturgical skills, I looked for Jimmy and located him within the unstoppable force of his creativity. Using only my own words and "free inventions," I found Jimmy urging a most exciting and tragic character, Giovanni, to emerge unapologetically from the tower of his writing genius.

Waiting for Giovanni

By Jewelle Gomez

In collaboration with Harry Waters Jr.

This is a dream play in which Jimmy, a Black novelist, is deciding whether or not to publish his novel about a tragic love story between two white men in Paris, which

would put at risk his burgeoning career and political reputation in the Civil Rights movement and perhaps cost him the love of his life. It takes place primarily in 1957 in Jimmy's mind. This monologue (although his fictional character Giovanni is on stage) occurs as Jimmy is deciding to abandon publishing the novel even though it is his life's blood.

ACT II Scene 3

(JIMMY by the typewriter, among the manuscript pages he's scattered on the floor. Giovanni clutches one of the discarded pages to his chest, a look of desperation on his face.)

JIMMY.

Of these matters, one critic said, I write with unusual candor. 'Of these matters!' What way is that to talk about love ... desire? I suppose it's no surprise that some can't talk of these matters at all.

Somewhere in the muck and mire, before we rose up to stand on our hind legs desire devolved from a bright rose capable of lighting the dense night and became a pus-filled wound to be hidden behind drapes drawn tight.

Desire is a mystery. Bright *and* dark; damp, slippery and aridly hot. When I look at Luc, I see it all. In my hands he feels like a pulsing sun. His life moves through me like photosynthesis; a complex chemical reaction that sharpens my soul, brings me into focus.

Then he's sweet butter, soft and intimate, making me want to slather him on crusty bread. I suppose that makes me a baguette.

However, I am not fooled by his softness. His body leans in but he does not. The gossip about his past affairs is no secret on either continent. But the bond between us is electric and it does travel in both directions.

I am puzzled at why my brothers insist on their right to stifle this uncountable treasure. I can't be sure if it's simply that they must protest in that Shakespearean way---too much. Or have their senses been perverted by the way their manhood was brutalized: Slavery, Jim Crow, night shift jobs. But haven't I too been beside them?

Apparently not! I must have missed that century and arrived, a fully formed flower of desire, disconnected from their struggle, from my manhood... If *they* are to be believed!

I have been too afraid to write of these matters but I did... I needed to write it. But ... publication? What should I care if it ever sees the light of day?

Whether Richard or the *New York Times* approve or not, the beautiful men I drink with in bars and cafes will always be there. I need them. And I need Luc more than I need that gawdammed novel. Don't I?

Lights down.

ACT II Scene 10

(JIMMY, letting go of his fear and despair, picks up the pages of his novel which he's thrown to the floor.)

JIMMY.

It is true that, like air, what is most important to us can be completely invisible. The Little Prince hears this more than once in the desert about friendship, imagination, and certainly of love. But other invisible things are lurking too: shame, betrayal, fear. They can all be equally compelling.

In fact, to some, fear and anger have the most magnetic appeal---the gravity pull of a small '*planette*'. How do I prevent becoming either the victim...or the instrument of these gravities? I'm anchored in the words of those who surround me ... and their dreams---both found and lost.

The city of my father, Harlem, was a cornucopia of dreams. But, inevitably, as with fruit stacked in a bowl: we who are settled near the bottom---away from the air and light---begin to decay quickly ... as he did. Every day I heard his shame in my head channeled through the demands of others.

My father's certainty that he was the holder of all truth made him bitter. And bitterness stunts and scalds. It withers any attempts at new growth.

Even now, some, like my father, expect that closing their eyes to what is alive before them will make the vision of blackness clearer. The sweep of eyelashes as they lower their lids is barbed wire raw on my skin. Still, I can do no more than bind my own wounds and insist I am neither silent nor invisible.

In church, on the television news I watch Black children holding hands, marching, smiling as if the world will embrace them. While I know it will explode in their faces. The villagers are waiting to ignite a bonfire beneath their feet too.

This story is one I ... need ... to tell and he is the one I wish to tell it. *(Lights up on GIOVANNI)* Unknown. Loving with the certainty of the tides. In truth, I could never throw love away. My love, my needs, my questions are my own to be examined by me ... read by many. But judgment? Well, everyone's a critic.

(JIMMY and GIOVANNI take deep breath in and exhale together.)

JIMMY & GIOVANNI.

(Together, happy) C'est vrai

JIMMY.

In the beginning was the word ... words made from the breath of life. It is the same breath whether we are singing a praise song or taking in the scent of our beloved who lies naked beside us. This breath is why they burn books. And why I must write them.

Each book is *my* way of wringing life from death.

No matter how hot the fire burns at our feet. No matter how loud the sound of those who turn away--I am always me ... inside *here*, looking out.

Bearing witness. Preaching the word.

(Lights on only JIMMY and GIOVANNI as JIMMY sits at the typewriter. He picks up a pencil from beside the typewriter, sticks it behind his ear. He begins to type steadily. Then light out on GIOVANNI who looks more solid than at the open. JIMMY types joyously.)

(Lights to black) End of Play

Note

- 1 August Strindberg, *A Dream Play, and Four Chamber Plays* (Seattle, University of Washington Press, 1973), p. 19.

Work Cited

Strindberg, August, *A Dream Play, and Four Chamber Plays* (Seattle, University of Washington Press, 1973).

Contributor's Biography

Jewelle Gomez (Cabo Verdean/Ioway/Wampanoag) is a writer and activist and the author of eight books including the double Lambda Award-winning novel, *The Gilda Stories* (1991), which has been in print for thirty years and was recently optioned by Cheryl Dunye for a TV mini series. New Conservatory Theatre Center commissioned and produced three of her plays: "Waiting for Giovanni," "Leaving the Blues," and "Unpacking in P'town." Her newest collection of poetry is *Still Water* (2022). Her novel's sequel, *GILDA: Blood Relations*, is forthcoming.