



## RIVER OF LIFE

A CONVERSATION ON INDIGO, A BLUES OPERA  
WITH KARMA MAYET JOHNSON, CREATOR,  
& TOSHI REAGON, DISCUSSANT<sup>1</sup>

TOSHI: ...my Mother [Bernice Johnson Reagon] sings a song called River of Life, [singing] “there’s a river somewhere, it flows through life with everyone, and it flows through the mountain, down through the valley, under the sun, Yes it is, Yes it is, Yes it is, Yes it is, a river of life”...and it reminds me of Indigo so much, and that’s a Blues song, and I remember when I first heard my Mom sing it, I was like, that’s a Blues song? Because it had so much hope and so much range in it, and it has...this energy in it that I just never really associated with Blues before I heard this song. Blues is the most storytelling music I think there is—but this is exuberant hope and sustenance and continuation and using the river to remind you of yourself and of your brilliance all the time, and then it says, “Yes it is, Yes it is,” and that reminds me so much of the whole work of Indigo, how you tell a story...that is inside of two centuries, covers so much devastation and pain.

[To audience] If you catch it, you know, she [Karma] doesn’t really leave anything out. She lets you know how much work people had to do on a plantation; it’s a small section, but she says “I did this, I did this, I did this”... she lets you know the range of ages that’s on the plantation, she lets you know how many people came and were someplace, and if the owner of the plantation dies, everybody gets sold off, so there’s a battle to want to stay in an intolerable situation in order to not be in an even more intolerable situation, and that you live like that every single day of your life, no matter how long you got to live. She lets you know that we wanted to live, even inside of the worst of times, we wanted to live.

And so we kept creating inside of that time. But the thing that is really incredible is the story starts in love and pain, and then it—to go forward—goes backward in love and pain, and comes back through, and the whole time you are watching the story you know where it's gonna go. Somehow, even though I know where it's gonna go, I can't help but feel so sweet when the two women meet each other. When I was in the audience at [a workshop showing] and in that scene where Liza and Bell first meet each other, you could—it was a tangible feeling—you could feel people breathe differently and exhale, this energy that I know we've been carrying around with us, forever. There was something so—such a release you offered, for people to see love, inside of a story about slaves, and for people to see queer people, gay women, lesbians, in love, and to see a courtship, and to see like the bumblebees and the giggles and the flowers was extraordinary, extraordinary work—so, I'd like to ask you, I know it's inside of a trilogy—but is there some reason that this is the one that's on the stage? Can you talk about that?

KARMA: There are three stories—three books. In the beginning we're in 1912 and Liza has just shot this man, who thought he was bout to rape her—and had another thing comin—that moment has a whole story of its own, has a whole play of its own: what happens that day and in the days after that. Then there's the story—that occupies most of the current staged version—that takes place in the 1850's. We go to another generation because these same folks go through reincarnations in this family line. So there's another story that happens in New Orleans in the late 90s and early 2000s, the same set of lovers but incarnated in a completely different situation.

Mostly, in terms of why this piece of it now, it's pragmatic. Because the first time I put it up as a workshop at the Fringe Festival in DC, I was self-producing, and I was like ok, it's gon be me, Ashley, and a guitar...so I was like, how can I? I had Tomas Doncker, guitarist, being Papa Mosiah, LuBell's granddaddy. Papa Mosiah is one of the children. When they get free—in this section presented here—when they get free and they live in Delaware—as you heard by the time they got to Delaware in 1860, Delaware had already signed the Fugitive Slave Act so it's not a free state anymore... but there's a sizeable enough free Black community there that they're able to blend in and elude recapture the

rest of their days, so they actually do live happily ever after. They end up havin this big house that is full of kids because all their connections on the Underground Railroad recognize their house as a place to bring the children who lose their parents along the way. So they have some kids whose families all left as a family, as a unit—and a parent or two got injured, got captured along the way, and there's this baby, and they gotta go back and get some more people, there's nowhere to leave the baby—well we always know we can take it to Liza's house. So they end up with like 12 babies. So they raise all these babies, and Papa Mosiah is one of them. Now later on when he's older, he has a grandchild, that's when the other story happens in 1912. So I was tryin to compress it, you know, like how do I get all this into like an hour and a half but still let the people know that this other story's connected to it. So eventually ...y'all sit in the theater for 8 hours...

TOSHI: Oh, I have so many questions. Can you talk about the music? You call it a Blues opera. There's a lot of range in that, so gon do yo thang...

KARMA: Well, I called it an opera because all the elements are collaborating to move the narrative ahead. So much gets told without text, so because the music, the text, the movement, the choreography, and the visual setting are holding equal weight—I thought this makes sense that it fits in with what that form is about in terms of why I call it an opera.

TOSHI: Some things are really iconic without being something gigantic. And that's a way that Black people really operate a lot. We have iconic things that happen in our communities and they happen in small ways and they end up breeding all of this other stuff. And something gigantic happens eventually but you trace the line back. I feel like this is an iconic work. Because it's very unique work—I don't see anybody else doing anything like this. This certain swerve you have on it, I really say that hopefully we can produce this in a way that you would like to see it produced...

So can you just talk about Indigo like how you put the whole thing in the seed that she carried with her and planted wherever she went?

KARMA: I listen. One of the ways that I work is I work as a medium. So I listen. I'm trained as a poet, so where my skill comes in is in the sounds and in the structure, but the information, I didn't make up. So all of that information, that's just direct instruction. I was told about the Indigo; I was told about the seeds. I was told about the way when you...when she picks the sassafras, there's a certain way that the leaf will be turned toward the east because the plant is at a certain point where you can receive a certain concentration of medicine from it...I was told these things, and I wrote them down as they were told to me, and after they were down, I did some dramaturgy, and I was shocked. I was just...not that I didn't expect the channels to work—because they work—but still when you're a person of faith, you never cease to be amazed. So when I was told about the Delaware Indians, I had done no reading about the Delaware Indians, I was told: "my name is Willow, I'm a Delaware Indian, write it down child." I wrote it down. And then after it was all down, I was like, oh I can't put the thing on a stage without doin some dramaturgy, so I went and I looked up the Underground Railroad, and lo and behold, the Delaware Indians ran the Underground Railroad. Well alright then.

TOSHI: Well that almost makes you unafraid of what's to come, when you know you have such great opportunity within yourself without anything else, that your self is enough to get you to your next place almost make you wanna run out here and start the revolution.

## NOTE

1. Excerpt from Audio Transcript of Post-Reading Discussion of Indigo as a Work in Progress as part of *Sinners and Saints, A Festival of Black American Vernacular Culture*. Curated by Imani Uzuri, held at JACK Arts, Brooklyn, NY Feb. 2014.



## INDIGO

A BLUES OPERA IN ONE ACT

Karma Mayet Johnson

Indigo follows lovers Eliza and LuBell from the Mississippi Delta of 1912 backward in time to 1856–1860 in Northern Virginia, Maryland, and Delaware during their prior incarnation as Bell and LizaSue. A group of women actors form a living set (variously similar in function to an acrobatic troupe, a Greek chorus, and a Yoruba masquerade band), singing and employing movement throughout the piece. Musicians are onstage. The instrumentation consists of resophonic guitar, strings, percussion, and voice. The ThunderBook—an heirloom quilt, which doubles as a divination tool—hangs prominently onstage.

### Characters:

**LuBell**—23, Lover of Freedom. Eliza’s lover. Granddaughter of Mosiah. Mosiah was an adopted son of Bell and LizaSue.

**Eliza**—19, headstrong, outspoken, cunning. Skilled farmer and quilter. LuBell’s lover.

**Elemental Women (E.W.)**—Shapeshifters.

**Bell**—27, Namesake Ancestor of LuBell. Free Black Woman, Androgynous. Literate. Possessing a single focus: Liberation. Passionate.

**LizaSue**—25, Namesake Ancestor of Eliza. Enslaved Native/Black Woman. Herbalist. Hard worker. Dreamer. Daughter of “Injun” Lucy.

**Willow**—37, Lenape (Delaware Indian) Woman. First cousin of “Injun” Lucy. Conductor on the Underground Railroad. Straight shooter. No time for foolishness. Compassionate.



Cast of Indigo workshop during tech rehearsal; Karma communicates with lighting designer to set a cue during exploration of the escape to Freedom segment.

Five women stand in a semicircle. Behind them hangs a 20-foot-long piece of textile art made of deep indigo and soft lilac cloth with embroidery in the shape of branched lightning and blue, turquoise, and fuchsia embroidery in the shape of a river moving through it.

(Instrumental Indigo overture)

## Scene 1

1922, Mississippi Delta.

Outside among trees near LUBELL's home

(Processional: Cast enters in ceremonial choreography)

LUBELL

(as an incantation)

blue the ring of thunder  
blue the wall of the shrine  
blue in the swell of the river  
blue in the sky  
we Mosiah children

learn-ed of lightning  
we beg passage  
color to the road  
color to the shrine  
color to the road  
color to the shrine

#### ELEMENTAL WOMEN

(echoing LUBELL intermittently)

blue...thunder...river...children...color...to the road

#### LUBELL

I am named for my Bigmama Bell. My Papa Mosiah say, Bigmama Bell and Bigmama LizaSue raise him in Delaware. Us wasn't always here in Mississippi. My Bigmama Bell. She said a child would come, named LuBell—that's me. Said, LuBell would grow and find a friend name Eliza. I ask Papa Mosiah: Bigmama Bell passed on way before I was born—how she know I would come? How she know I would find a friend name Eliza? How she know it? Papa Mosiah say: She know it 'cause she read (to be pronounced in present tense) the ThunderBook. Bigmama LizaSue stitched up that ThunderBook quilt. ThunderBook can tell a story 'fo it happen. Was 1912. I'll never forget it, the way the light spoke in the trees that day. Eliza come runnin. First, I thought she was playin with me. Then, I saw the sleeve ripped from her shoulder, the muddy red mess on her hands and feet...

#### Scene 2

Flashback: narration of memory gives way to reliving.

1912, Mississippi Delta

(ELIZA enters running. LUBELL begins to examine Eliza)

#### ELIZA

I just couldn't let that cracker get at me, LuBell. I'm gon need you to put that shotgun straight in the river.

#### BELL

I'm glad you shot him.