

Silent=Silence=Death=Silence,
For-fucking-ever-more

INSPIRATION: Silence = Death

In our society there are many things we are silent about. The AIDS epidemic brought to light how being silent was a long-term death sentence; the same can be said of other atrocities happening today. This play on domestic violence, combines my interpretation of words written by activist and poet Audre Lorde (taken from “The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action”) and the impetus behind the AIDS ACT UP collective (co-founded by Avram Finkelstein, a political artist for protest). Intimate partner violence is a cycle that must be disrupted; the muted screams of its devastation, must be transformed into millions of united voices sharing the same desire to break the silence.

CHARACTERS:

NOTE: There are five actors, not officially named as characters, but rather given a title; no name is used within the play.

BLACK LESBIAN POET (BLP): Could be any female African-American actor, though I see her as being in her mid-twenties, neutral in appearance, animated, well informed, and devoted to her task. Beyond that, there are no pre-conceptions of her.

ENSEMBLE: The ensemble is composed of four actors, 2 women and 2 men; they should be of varying physical appearance with a stark difference between them. They are:

MARCI
JENNI
JASON
DANTE

AUDIENCE: The audience should be treated as another character whenever the stage directions are “to Audience”.

STAGING & SETTING:

A bed (or table, anything that’ll work) with several articles of clothing and a suitcase. The **victim** in each scene is the one packing until the play is about to end. You can either re-use the same clothes as part of the reset or you can have ample clothing to last through all the resets. A clearly defined setting is not desirable, but there should be on-stage objects that allow for the image of a door and window, though they shouldn’t be these things.

PRODUCTION NOTES:

TO AUDIENCE: Here, Black Lesbian Poet treats the audience members as characters and speaks to them as such. She splits her attention between focusing on the actors and direct addresses, which are denoted with // and the use of third person pronouns. Generally speaking, Black Lesbian Poet casually dispenses information; a sharp contrast to when she talks “to AUDIENCE”, which is distinctly blunt and direct.

AUDRE LORDE: This applies to when Black Lesbian Poet is presenting the work of Lorde. This dialogue needs to have its own unique presentation created by the actor, not a technical element.

BACK TO EARTH: There are times when the actors create secondary scenes outside the primary one. Sometimes they appear to be without expression; other times they are very expressive. The differences are noted, but the ending of them is always denoted as “Back to Earth”.

RESET: This is when the actors take a new position of either victim or abuser. Think of it as a cycle—or the improv game “Freeze”. Typically, the victim exits the scene and the abuser becomes the victim; this is when a new perpetrator steps in. The resets are designated allowing for a variation of combinations. The exchanges should be automatic and seamless. The act of resetting and the text should not influence one another; they are independent actions. The first actor named in the reset is most often the victim; this pattern changes some towards the end of the play. The order of the resets can be altered, but the combinations below must happen so all pairings exist.

| | | |
|-----------------------|----|----|
| Opening | F1 | M1 |
| 1 ST reset | M1 | M2 |
| 2 nd reset | M2 | F2 |
| 3 rd reset | F2 | F1 |
| 4 th reset | M2 | F1 |

READING TIME: approximately 11 minutes

OPENING SCENE: A light slowly comes up on BLACK LESBIAN POET and continues until JASON speaks.

BLACK LESBIAN POET

(Audre Lorde)

I have come to believe what is most important to me must be spoken and shared, even at great risk. I am standing here as a Black lesbian poet, knowing the meaning of this and all things hinges on the fact that I am alive and might not have been. Audre Lorde.

The stage is fully lit. BLP leads MARCI to the clothing.

BLACK LESBIAN POET

// A starting point. She could be anyone. You. Or even me. Except, I know, I'll never be her.

(signals for JASON to approach)

// This guy could be anyone of us. Except for me. I'm not him. But you could be.

JASON

Goin' somewhere?

BLACK LESBIAN POET

// This could be happening right now. In many places. Including your neighbor's home.

JASON

Cat got your tongue?

BLACK LESBIAN POET

Ignoring him is tricky. But nothing to worry about now. // That'll come, later.

JASON

Hey, I got an idea. How 'bout we go out? Just the two of us. Like old times. Have some fun.

BLACK LESBIAN POET

// Trick #1. A nicer way to hold her hostage, because, you know, she would be a bitch if she didn't go.

JASON

I'm talkin' to you.

BLACK LESBIAN POET

// Here begins the transition. // You know it all too well, don't you?

JASON

Why ain't you answerin' me?

BLACK LESBIAN POET

You probably didn't notice, it was very subtle, but she's now looking out the corner of her eye. She doesn't wanna be caught off-guard in case her world disappears. That's when he bashes her face with his fist.

(JASON and MARCI have a vacant look about them as he slams her.)

She has to ready herself for the impact. It wouldn't be good if she hit the floor after just one punch. It'd be like starting at the end, despite being the beginning.

Return to Earth. Scene resets: JASON & DANTE.

DANTE

What's the matter with you? Why you actin' like this?

BLACK LESBIAN POET

Oh, oh. He's recognizing a change in you. // That awareness triggers an instinctive reaction. He's considering what he might have to do to keep the status qua. //

(BLP gives DANTE a set of keys. He tosses them above his head, unconcerned about catching them.)

Right now, he's imagining you as nothing more than a set of keys. That the law of what-goes-up-must-come-down, applies to you too. // It's a question of how high must he be thrown to reset his fear. For him to welcome, even *embrace*, a return to their everyday life.

DANTE continues to toss the keys until BLP catches them.

DANTE

Jesus Christ, slow down already. Let's talk about this. Tell me what's goin' on with you.

BLACK LESBIAN POET

(to JASON)

Nope. Don't do it. Trick #2. He'll keep you talking until you're exhausted and can't speak another word. He knows, //

(to AUDIENCE)

...you know, he will *never* understand what you're saying.

DANTE

Are you thinkin' of leavin' me?

BLACK LESBIAN POET

Yes. Many times. // In his head, of course. You see, this one (DANTE) pulled that one (JASON) from one corner to the other. Yanked him from his family, his friends, his comfort zone. Then took him to a strange land so he would behave like a frightened child, clinging desperately to anything familiar—i.e., him. There's no safe reply, even if he could conjure up the most fabulous lie.

DANTE

Say somethin', damnit. What's going on with you? Is it me?

BLACK LESBIAN POET

(to DANTE)

Seriously? You have to ask? Of course it's you. // He can't say that though. Trick #3 is endless questions.

(to JASON)

But if you could, what would you say?

ENSEMBLE

(with vacant faces, to AUDIENCE, now the abuser)

I will not answer you. I will not answer your questions. I will no longer answer *to* you. I am done answering. I am done.

Back to Earth.

BLACK LESBIAN POET

This could be independence day. Or not. We'll see.

DANTE

Hey, do you still love me? You and I, we're good, right?

BLACK LESBIAN POET

Absolutely do not answer that question! No way, no how. // Trick #4.

DANTE

Well, do you love me or not?

BLACK LESBIAN POET

(Audre Lorde)

In the harsh light of scrutiny, judgment, pain, death, I have already lived with these fears in silence. And I remind myself even if I had been born without a voice or promised my silence

BLACK LESBIAN POET (continue)

for all eternity, I would still suffer, and I will still die. Whether I speak out or not, I will die. My silence won't protect me, and your silence won't protect you. Audre Lorde.

Scene resets: MARCI & JENNI.

JENNI

I still love you. You know that, right? I'll never stop lovin' you. That's like crazy impossible.

BLACK LESBIAN POET

(to MARCI.)

No, no, no. Don't fall for trick #5. // Stay the course.

JENNI

(picking up a pink pussy cap)

Hey, where'd you get this?

BLACK LESBIAN POET

// Awkward. This is a good time to start worrying. // You worry because she will insist on you answering her. The thing is, you can't talk about entrusting your life to a friend who works to expose the truth, leaving isn't as easy as everyone thinks it is. // You trust, because not only has she been there, she learnt how to fight, to survive.

JENNI

Answer me.

BLACK LESBIAN POET

Things are about to turn ugly. // Maybe even physical.

MARCI

I know what this is for.

BLACK LESBIAN POET

Wow, who would have guessed that?

(to MARCI, about to react.)

But don't you dare say a word. Stay the course.

JENNI

How you planin' on gettin' there? You ain't got no car. And I sure as hell ain't takin' you. How you gettin' there?

BLACK LESBIAN POET

Ah fuck. No more tricks up her sleeve. This is not good. // Not good at all.

(to AUDIENCE)

A hurricane is approaching you at 95 miles per hour. Winds like this, you need to find shelter, like right now. If you can't do that, find it in yourself to stay calm, hide your fear, keep breathing, and // stay the course.

JENNI

You ain't goin' to that damn fuckin' march.

BLACK LESBIAN POET

(Audre Lorde)

I am exposed by an unforgiving light showing me my greatest regret. My silences. To speak could have meant pain. But pain will eventually end, and I may still be alive to speak. But death... Death is a flat line of silence, stretching out into infinity. The chance to speak has passed. Audre Lorde.

JENNI

Your ass is stayin' right here, with me.

BLACK LESBIAN POET

// Hard to escape the storm when it's blocking your pathway out. You could try to go through her, but don't. Not smart. There is another option. // Still risky, but the odds of you surviving look better. // Slightly, so, anyway.

(to MARCI)

One quick steady unrelenting no thinking no hesitating no pausing no anything else except a life-saving push out the door harder than you think you can. You gotta move fast. Shut the door and lock it. Stay the course. Forget the clothes. Stay the course. Risk the window to get the hell out of here. There's no turning back now. // Not if you're wanting to live.

(MARCI stands at the edge of the stage,
contemplating the jump. To AUDIENCE.)

Come on, jump. You know the door will eventually be defeated, so why are you waiting? Get the fuck out of here. // Stay the course.

JENNI

You better not let me get my hands on you, 'cause I swear, you're gonna pay for this.

BLACK LESBIAN POET

Shit, now she's kicking the door. You know what the door is going through. You know the feeling of being kicked hard, // to be broken down.

Scene resets: JENNI & DANTE; Jenni joins MARCI who has progressed to her legs dangling out the window. JENNI remains standing.

DANTE

(To the AUDIENCE from this point on.)

I ain't lettin' you go, bitch. Don't even think about it.

BLACK LESBIAN POET

(to MARCI)

You need to jump now.

(MARCI jump. To JENNI.)

You know you're not safe. You gotta get out of arms-reach for any chance of reclaiming your freedom. // Oh my god, what would that be like?

Freedom. Uncut ecstasy. There's nothing like it.

ENSEMBLE

Like lying on the grass watching the clouds float by.
Or settling down with a good book after pouring myself a large glass of wine.
Mine would be leisurely walking my dog and playing fetch, with me retrieving the ball.
I would find a secluded beach and sit for hours watching the sun disappear.
I'm feasting on an incredible dinner at a fancy restaurant without a second thought.
For me, it'd be hanging out with my friends at a cheap bar, where everyone knows my name.

ENSEMBLE (as one)

Sleeping an entire night, waking up late, without any fear of what the day will bring.

BLACK LESBIAN POET

But you're not free,

(Back to Earth.)

and you are reminded of this as he shouts through the door...

DANTE

You can't run fast enough to get away from me.

BLACK LESBIAN POET

Sadly, past experiences prove this to be true.

(JENNI dangles from the window.)

But this time, you're gonna try really, really hard, because you know, // his anger lacks humanity.

Reset: DANTE & MARCI. Dante goes to the window.

BLACK LESBIAN POET

(to JENNI)

Seriously, what are you waiting on?

(to AUDIENCE)

Jump.

(to JENNI)

Ah shit, there goes the door, slamming without any mercy, battering the wall. It's as loud as a gunshot, shattering the air all around you. My god, would you please jump!

(to AUDIENCE.)

Hear that? That's your heart pulsating, resonating like a kettle drum.

(to DANTE)

So why are you still here? // Jump, now, while you can.

(DANTE jumps.)

// Thankfully, survival is hard-wired in most of us.

MARCI

(hanging out the window)

I'm coming for you. Don't think for one minute that you're gonna get away from me, 'cause that ain't happening. I'll catch-up with your sorry ass. You know I will.

BLACK LESBIAN POET

Why would now be any different than before? // Because today isn't an everyday that has come and gone. Today, your friend and her friends have come to be with you...

(JENNI & JASON join DANTE.)

...standing right beside you. She looks down on you with murder in her eyes, but she doesn't dare move. In the thoughts of Audre Lorde, we are taught to fear, to not use language to define who we are or what we need to survive. We wait in silence for the strength to be fearless. We wait while silence kills us. And we stand there, watching it happen.

(That voice hidden inside us, must be revived to find its way out. To JENNI.)

Come on, do it. Speak.

Dialogue is addressed to the AUDIENCE, who is now the perpetrator.

JENNI

You wanna know if I'm goin' someplace? I'm goin' to that damn fuckin' women's march as you call it. You wanna know how I'm gettin' there? I got a ride. You wanna know if I'm leavin' you? You bet your sorry fuckin' ass I am.

BLACK LESBIAN POET

(Audre Lorde)

I had planned to speak, had hoped more that someone else would. We can hide in corners, voiceless. We can sit forever while we are destroyed, distorted and turned into waste. We can sit in our safe space being silent, and the fear will not go away. For us to survive in the mouth of the dragon, we must first know the truth: there was *never* a divine plan to keep us alive. We must plot our own way of surviving. Audre.

JASON

I will no longer allow you to take my world away from me.

DANTE

I will not be a set of keys for you to toss, higher and higher until you watch me fall and break.

MARCI

(jumping)

I don't know what I'm gonna do next, but I'm gonna decide that. Not you. Not anymore. And you know what...

ENSEMBLE

It's about damn fuckin' time.

BLACK LESBIAN POET

(Audre Lorde)

Being seen is a vulnerability, but it is also a bountiful resource we can depend on to give shape to our greatest strength—each other. There are so many silences to be broken, that must be transformed into language and action. So said the Lorde.

(Slow fadeout.)

Fear and pain and death will never, ever disappear. Listen for your voice. Hear it...

ENSEMBLE

Speak.

The End