

**Title: Q&A with Cast (Tom Key, Kenny Leon) and Director (Susan V. Booth)**

**What drew you to the story of *Blood Knot* in 1998? And, why is it still relevant today?**

**Tom Key:** I first performed Morris as a graduate student at the University of Tennessee in 1973. It was the first production of the Clarence Brown Theater Company, a professional acting company headed by Sir Anthony Quayle who was in residence at the University. They chose the two-character play in part to symbolize the relationship between education and profession by casting a student with a professional. I was the student, and I spent a day in New York City reading with actors auditioning for the role of Zachariah from the Negro Theater Ensemble. It was a life-changing experience for me. At 23, I thought I was pretty good, but the intention and focus that these men brought into the room gripped me up to a standard from which I've never been able to let myself relax. Rueben Greene was cast as Zachariah, and all I can say is that Fugard's script and an audience created an emotionally nuclear theatrical experience.

In 1998, early in my tenure as Artistic Director at Theatrical Outfit, I wanted to produce the play in Atlanta because I felt there was a need in the community to experience it and a potential for the right casting combination if Kenny said "Yes." Atlanta had cast herself onto the world stage as host of the 1996 Olympics, and I felt, as a result, there was a particular receptivity to hear a work like *Blood Knot*—one that so vividly dramatizes, with the story of these two brothers, how all of us on this planet, for better or for worse, are bound to one another. Avoidance or violence are not only moral failures, but impractical options.

Kenny agreed to do the show with me, and I knew it would be the no-holds-barred school of acting, and it was. We came from very different circumstances on one level, but on a kind of soul level I have always felt that we're very much alike, like we're brothers. As a white man growing up in Birmingham, I heard so many ugly and cynical things from people of the same race about that concept, mocking that we are "brothers under the skin"—in fact, I wrote that in *Cotton Patch Gospel* as a line for Herod to say—but with Kenny, I knew it was true. We both chose the theater as a profession, and I know we both believe in it as a vocation—as what we do to search for the truth that makes us free and as what makes for community. *Also, I found it very interesting that we were both president of the student council in our high schools. I mean, that's significant too, right?*

Now, in 2009, we live in a post-9/11 world, in which the aspiration to evolve past violence is no longer an ideal but a requirement for our survival. We have constructed The Balzer Theater at Herren's, which provides a perfect physical intimacy to maximize the transformative power of Fugard's text. Kenny Leon and Wendy Riggs asked Theatrical Outfit this time if we would like to co-produce *Blood Knot* this summer, and the last week could coincide with the National Black Arts Festival. On a very personal level, I have an appreciation and gratitude for my one older brother that has deepened profoundly after the passing of both our parents. Finally, my brother Kenny said he

would go there with me again. As hard of hearing as I often am to what Life is asking of me, even I knew that the right answer to Kenny's invitation would be "Yes".

**Kenny Leon:** Number one, I call myself a friend of Athol, and I think he's one of the great writers of the past 20 years. I've done almost all of his plays, and he's one of my favorite playwrights. I made a trip to South Africa in 1994 and spent a month there discovering the beauty of the country and the people. There was also a clear understanding of the universality of problems encountered by the people of South Africa. Athol makes these large issues simplistic by allowing us to relate to these problems on a personal level. Then the universality of these issues really rings true, and I love doing a play about all of us bleeding the same blood.

### **What are some of the challenges of the script?**

**Susan Booth:** Fugard says it best in the introduction to the play: "You and me. This is how it starts. . . . There is another existence and it feels, and I feel it feels, yet I am impotent. I cannot take over. I want to. But I cannot. There is nothing I can do except stand by and watch." There is such a deep yearning in this play – the yearning of a man to step inside the skin, the heart, the pain of his brother. It's beautifully sad.

**KL:** The challenges here are no different than finding the challenges in any script. It's always essential to find the intentions of the playwright. You have to discover the truth in this story for two consecutive hours. Finding out what the characters say about one another--that has a lot to do with rhythm and tempo, as well.

### **How will you prepare for your role?**

**TK:** I will listen over and over and over to the CD of South Africans speaking both the white and black dialect, because Morris' father was white and his mother was black, and he veers between both. I will show up to rehearsal, pay attention, do as Ms. Booth directs, learn Jason Armit's fight choreography, let my inner Morris go to meet Kenny's Zachariah, learn my lines, say "thanks" daily to Athol Fugard, pray, breathe deeply, eat right, exercise regularly, probably have wild dreams, and stop shaving.

**KL:** Well, I like to read a script at least five times before learning the lines. I'll start there. I do a lot of talking out loud. I have to understand how the person moves and how the person sounds. Then I like to read and put my hands on those things that are worldly. I've been watching a lot of CNN to see how far we have come from since 1998.

### **What are some of your favorite scenes or dialogue in the play—and do these moments come from both the dark *and* light sides of how humans cope with pain?**

**SB:** When they write that first letter together – and Morris is imagining a romance and Zachariah is anticipating a calorie burn – that's so perfectly funny, right, and true.

**KL:** You know I like almost every moment, and every previous moment has to be delivered in truth. So really my first line, "Not as hot as last night" let's me know we're on this roller coaster for 90 minutes.

**What do you want audiences to bring away after seeing Theatrical Outfit & True Colors' production of *Blood Knot*?**

**SB:** There are feelings that transcend words. And even though we work in this language-based art form, as humans, we have so many languages – some spoken, some gestured, some fought – by which we express ourselves and through which expression is shared with us. My hope is that audiences leave the theatre with an itch, a kind of visceral yen, to understand the people in their lives a little better.

**KL:** I want them to really revisit on a personal level how beautiful life really is, how there is a balance. I want them to see the tragedy and the comedy in these situations. Really, I'd like them to rediscover how beautiful and rich life really can be, and that we are inexplicably tied together.

**Athol Fugard has written several well known plays. Have you performed in any of his other works?**

**KL:** I want to say “all of them,” but there are so many. Some of the plays that really stand out are: *Boesman and Lena*, *The Island*, *Sizwe Bansi is Dead*, & *A Lesson from Aloes*.

**Kenny, you have a personal friendship with Fugard. Would you share how your initial meeting came about and what invigorates your friendship the most?**

**KL:** You know, in the last few years I haven't spoken with him. He's quite a private person and has spent most of the past two years with his grandchildren in San Diego. Initially we met when I was at the Alliance. We had co-produced his play *Playland*. We also did it in at Market Theater in S. Africa and at The La Jolla Playhouse in San Diego. After that, he invited me to South Africa, where we shared meals and he showed me the rich culture of South Africa and explained the issues that the people and the country had been facing. Athol is a really special person who has given a lot to me and this world.

**Are you excited about the prospect of three Artistic Directors working together? Does this “meeting of the artistic minds” present its own special set of challenges or sensitivities?**

**SB:** I expect it to be a daily throw down. And I've been lifting, so I'm ready.

**KL:** I'm scared to death! But I'm looking forward to it.

**Susan, as some of our readers might know, you are the Artistic Director at the Alliance Theatre here in Atlanta. What is it like for you working with other local theatres and have you gained any insight in doing so?**

**SB:** It's a huge gift to be invited to direct in someone else's theatre. Kenny made that invitation to me a decade ago when he was running the Alliance, and it was an act of generosity that ended up changing my personal and professional life. Tom has been kind enough to bring me this invitation before, but schedules transpired against it until now. There's a great sense of responsibility—you want to give your friends and colleagues a work in which they and their audiences can feel a deep sense of pride. But there's also a profound freedom, candidly, to take off the Artistic Director hat. This is the first show I've done in a while where I *didn't* know the single ticket goal.