

New (!) Augustine

By

Wayne L. Firestone

WHY I LIKE IT: *Drama Editor JOHN SULLIVAN writes...* This entrancing short play projects its resonance like one of jazz musician Don Cherry's multi-cultural ragas. Even the moments where the main character's body is more or less restrained for transit through space pulse with the energy of prophecy and harbingers of revolution. At the core of this piece is the concept (and action) of tikkun olam: the reconciliation of polarities and repairing of rifts between matter and spirit, the arts and science, Islam and Judaism (very uplifting, indeed, to see this positive symbiosis). New Augustine carries a hopeful – perhaps solar-punk style - message of future evolution and transcendent revolution: if we're willing to do the work that birthing this new world entails. And reading New Augustine was (for me) like seeing a few crucial moments in Ursula K. Le Guin's great anarcho / syndicalist novel, *The Dispossessed*, embodied on the stage of my imagination. I have to ask the playwright: how and where do we find these transfigurative journey agents operating on the fringes of a oppressive global Uber-Culture that keeps us all distracted, diffracted, and steady at each other's throats? (Spacing is playwright's own). JS

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NEW AUGUSTINE

Synopsis:

In 2121, the last Jewish and Muslim communities are deported from Earth by spaceship to a ghetto planet where women engineer slaves experiment with immortality while covertly discovering their own secret codes for survival and escape. This allegorical piece explores how humanity's quest for immortality is less about technology and more about the enduring spirit of hope, even during our darkest moments.

Characters (all female bodied):

Darryl- Strong willed, defiant scientist with a spiritual disposition, dark skin and a love of music and dance.

Registrant- Futuristic bureaucrat who interacts more with the computer than the person with whom they are speaking.

Safka- Darryl's deceased grandmother--an elderly, spiritual Mediterranean woman in colorful robes, head-covering and sandals. Her presence is mystical and wise.

Doctor 1- The lead physician driven by scientific curiosity, authoritarian instructions and a dangerous fascination with prisoners as fodder for experimentation.

Doctor 2- Relates to Darryl as a slave laborer with something she needs to discover for state purposes. (Can be double-cast with Registrant.)

Dance partners for Darryl- One or two of the Doctors or Registrant can be re-costumed to join the prisoner crowd that observes and dances with Darryl in Scene 4.

SCENE 1- 9TH OF AV, 2121

Setting:

The stage is empty with a single photo projected on a screen or back wall depicting reddish, stormy clouds. A somber violin plays for a minute and then abruptly, defiantly, morphs into a distinctively festive klezmer fiddle for a few stanzas, creating a violent commotion, a siren and then a single gunshot, followed by silence.

Off stage a voice

SAFTA

And this was the last thing she heard before deportation to the New Augustine Ghetto.

Fade to black.

(Scene opens at a laboratory-like sterile registration table with a prisoner in shackles wearing a futuristic space suit and the registrant in a nondescript uniform and protective gloves. An official looking poster reads: "S.M.I.T.E. Is Right." A screen (or signpost) flashes the date-- 9 August 2121; and location--Cape Canaveral, Deep Space-Musk Terminal.)

REGISTRANT

Name?

DARRYL

Darryl Samson.

REGISTRANT

Samsung? Like the Asian country?

DARRYL

No Samson... the daughter of Samuel....

REGISTRANT

(interrupting)

Samson, according to our records is a Biblical name. You are... Testamental?

DARRYL

(continuing)

Granddaughter of Safta.

(Registrant runs searches on her computer.)

REGISTRANT

Safta? Samuel? Other Hebraic references. It would seem your Semitic creed is written all over your records. No sense in resisting the decree.

DARRYL

I am not resisting. I am here as required by the "SMITE" Order from Divina.

REGISTRANT

S--M--I--T--E: "Semites, Misfits and Intersexuals Transit and Expulsions Act" of July 4th 2121

(BEAT)

...by Her Excellency Divina. How do you officially declare to be classified?

DARRYL

I suppose I have always been considered a misfit.

REGISTRANT

Don't be smart. Misfits will be eliminated. You have already acknowledged your Semitic roots and I can confirm that with your registration date coded right here.

(Registrant lifts Darryl's sleeve and reviews numbers on her arm)

REGISTRANT

9-8-2121. Yes... that is today's date and you are here, very well.

DARRYL

Is there a reason I was chosen for this date?

REGISTRANT

Oh, it's not a special date just for you. It's for all of you remaining Semites from the East or the West. Don't you know your own history?

DARRYL

Tisha b 'av-- The Ninth of Av. Our fasting day?

REGISTRANT

(checking computer to confirm)

Your superstitious leaders made you avoid food so that you might avert the fate of centuries.

Your fasting didn't protect you; it just made you hungrier. We expelled all of your Muslim "cousins" during Ramadan, for equal measure.

(BEAT)

DARRYL

(grimacing, holding her stomach)

And where are our cousins now?

REGISTRANT

They await you on New Augustine a place hospitable to both of your Semitic gifts ... But only if you meet the conditions of ascension. Here you are now among the last of your Semitic kind to be deported not merely from your country...

(looking up from computer)

REGISTRANT

...but from this earth.

DARRYL

(looking outside toward the spaceship)

With a little help from Musk Ltd?

REGISTRANT

Since you have accepted your fate and not “resisted” you know the two remaining conditions for us to allow you to board the space craft bound for the Semitic Ghetto planet?

DARRYL

(nods her head affirmatively)

REGISTRANT

My voice comparison recorder requires audio verification.

DARRYL

Yes. I know the conditions.

REGISTRANT

In that case, what is the ritualistic object that you offer as a sacrifice?

DARRYL

(pulls a violin from a case and reluctantly hands it over.)

REGISTRANT

This is a music instrument. It is used for your archaic rituals?

DARRYL

It is a part of my inner soul. It is the channel that allows me to conjure the spirit, letters and song of my people. I presume that qualifies as a ritual.

REGISTRANT

Very well. If this is your ancient soul... may it be buried here on earth with the remainder of your community who attempted to resist the inevitable. When you board the spaceship be certain that nothing else remains here on earth of your people, your music or your soul.

(skeptically inspecting the instrument and then throwing it into a trash can)

DARRYL

(looking away in pain, and again grabbing her stomach as if punched)

REGISTRANT

You can now ascend to New Augustine, for eternal indentured service, but only after your final ritual at the statue of embarkation.

(pointing to the marble statue of a pig)

Go ahead. You know what you must do.

(Darryl hesitates, then kneels down to kiss the statue pig's feet and then walks in the direction of a sign that says "Embarkation," stopping momentarily when she hears a distant but growing sound of the klezmer song as she smirks and walks off the stage)

END OF SCENE

SCENE 2 -10TH OF AV

Darryl is alone in a vessel that constrains her movement but propped up in a way that she can speak directly to the audience as she narrates the voices and memories that accompany her on the journey. Her eyes open slowly as if from a pleasant dream to the reality of a living nightmare.

DARRYL

I seek these invisible moments for self-examination, knowing that I am both protected and exposed inside this massive spaceship...I rely mainly on my memories of childhood riddles and rhymes for inspiration to persevere in my uncertain circumstances.

As a young child, I remember the lessons on how to unlock the mystical, hypnotic powers I inherited from Safta, over the objections of my grandfather.

(off stage, dismissive male voice)

Torah and mysticism for a woman is simply folly!

DARRYL

Staring back at me daily from my confines is a familiar image in a fractured body-length mirror. It is the memory of my pre-teen self, absent the newly emerged breasts and hips that later filled my costume. Although I cannot fully visualize my deceased Safta in the dimly lit pod, I can remember myself at nine listening to Safta's cadenced voice. As I listen to her instructions, I see Safta's face emerge like an oracle in the mirror, replacing my own.

(A body length mirror frame is wheeled onto center stage in close proximity to Darryl. Through the mirror on the other side the audience and Darryl can see Safta as she starts to speak)

SAFTA

I will share with you today what I concealed from your mother and, god-willing, you will share with only your granddaughter and other chosen women. Curiously and deliberately like prime numbers, these familial connections skip over a matriarchal generation. It is a Mediterranean secret that I painstakingly withheld from my own mother and daughter alike, a responsibility that I now entrust to you. This spiritual connection has descended in our bloodline for many years, even though some have tried to bar us from understanding why.

(Safta gestures in pantomime during Darryl's narration which transitions into Safta speaking for herself to the younger Darryl)

DARRYL

Safta pauses and coughs into her *hamsa*-shaped fist, causing reverberations through her body, rattling the buckles on her worn sandals. I glance at the five digits on my own slight hand. Safta's indigo scarf pulls her hair away to an absent place and illuminates a cork-board face, both lined and smooth, weathered and fresh. With age, her back arches down, giving the appearance that we are almost of equal height...

SAFTA

What mother and child can never share or resolve, grandmother and granddaughter in life and in death can transcend. Our unbroken chain of support has withstood and outlived infanticide and battery, depression and self-mutilation. This link silently weaves a harmonious code that ensures our survival. When I am gone, I will accompany you in mimicked forms interpreted by the dancer. I will place my hands at your hips and guide gyrations as they help you to bear your first female child, and I will encloak you when your husband ignores you, or abandons you, or worse.

When your lips cannot find words to speak to your daughter, I will whisper letters for you to assemble in your night and daydreams.

DARRYL

I hear her words as a child but do not yet understand. The *aleph-betic* codes are stored in my memory. But for whom?

SAFTA

A mother can release her son to an unknown and dangerous world, only with tears and prayers, hoping he will arrive in a safer place. In this way, Yocheved launched Moses into the Nile River in a child's floating cradle. A mother could not relinquish her daughter in the same way. *La*, she simply cannot, not even when both babies drink from the same heaving bosom. The missing piece that I cannot share is what I have not learned myself. I can't tell you how to overcome the years of misunderstanding and pain ensnared in the generation in between granddaughters and grandmothers.

DARRYL

I begin to respond although I am not sure to whom--Safta, the mirror, or someone else.

SAFTA

To break through this ineluctable cycle we must transmit healing messages through the rhythmic dance for the unborn, followed by the natural birth of a child who sees energy, life and light beyond seams and scars. A child who hears voices within barenness and silence... I can tell you that the skipped generations of women to which you and I belong are the only ones entrusted with this legacy. But for now, this is also our enduring burden to share. We wait impatiently, to discover which individual, which generation will solve the riddle, remove the veil, before it is too late.

(BEAT)

You have everything you need for this journey inside of your own heart and mind. And one day too you shall ascend... on the wings of eagles. Ascension is your chosen path, a journey richer yet more dangerous than falling. And one day it will be your turn to dance.

SAFTA AND DARRYL

We will dance...

(they pause and look at one another)

...as one.

(Safta exits the stage)

DARRYL

"We will dance as one" she says to me, and then vanishes. I silently prepare for the dance, and repeat my Safta's mantra: "virtue dons her veil."

(Darryl shuts her eyes in sleep and remains on stage)

END OF SCENE

SCENE 3- 11TH OF AV

Two doctors in lab coats enter and approach her pod reviewing their monitors and speaking in front of a still sleeping Darryl.

DOCTOR1

There are signals from her sleep scans during the lift off that were...abnormal.

DOCTOR2

Abnormal in what way? Is she in danger?

DOCTOR1

Actually, abnormal in a positive way. As you know, we have been measuring the effects of positive and negative stress stimuli on this transport ship for over three years.

DOCTOR2

We do not awaken many of the workers for examination during day two, but the brain scans show signs that despite her stress she was calm... even ... joyful.

DOCTOR1

Any trace of drugs, alcohol, opy-plus or other medical fixers in her body?

DOCTOR2

None.

DOCTOR1

Then we must awaken her and examine further.

(Pressing keys on a computer or medical device Darryl begins to slowly and groggily awaken)

DARRYL

Where am I?

DOCTOR1

Deep Space Relocation Transport... It is normal to feel... disoriented.

DARRYL

How long have I been transporting?

DOCTOR1

Almost one day. We helped you sleep for the first stage. It can be rather unpleasant. Not many survived the early transports.

DOCTOR2

That was unfortunate.

DOCTOR1

And not very efficient.

DARRYL

The rumors were true. You experimented on us. And now what?

DOCTOR1

That will depend upon you.

DOCTOR2

What is the last thing that you remember?

DARRYL

I remember looking out and seeing the clouds... translucent doorways to where we were headed.

DOCTOR2

And where are you headed?

DARRYL

The ghetto. New Augustine. That is all that we were told.

DOCTOR1

But you heard other rumors?

DARRYL

There were many.

DOCTOR2

Which do you fear the most?

DARRYL

Men. That there are no more men there... (looking around) There are no men here. At the transport. There were only women. The attendant, you the doctors-- women. Is it true? The ghetto is female?

DOCTOR1

There is no need there... The future is female.

DARRYL

The present is female, the past is female, but how can we have a future with only women?

DOCTOR1

We have sent the high testosterone types to a planet that is conducive to maintenance of their seed.

DOCTOR2

We want to ensure there is a sufficient supply of fertile sperm for our eternal female needs.

DARRYL

You created an entire planet from deportations for men jerking off into your test tubes to ensure our female future?

(Doctors look at one another but do not reply)

DOCTOR2

Not deportations...We prefer to call them by their proper name-- "deep space relocations."

DOCTOR1

We are simply relocating you from one space...to deep space.

DARRYL

Simply relocating? Expelling every Jewish, Muslim and male “misfit” community on Earth and making us mind slaves?

DOCTOR1

It was all foretold in your own history, your own rituals. What the ancient Egyptians accomplished with pyramids and the hard labor of male muscle workers will pale in comparison to the civilization of the future you will help create with your female minds in New Augustine.

DARRYL

The Pharaohs enslaved, the Romans desecrated the Czars conscripted and the Nazis eliminated us with aid of engineers... and (accusingly) doctors.

(BEAT)

The white supremacists who followed them bullied us in cyber space, labeled us impure and turned us over to our Earth Empress Divina... for what?

DOCTOR2

We are transporting you to New Augustine not to destroy your people. Quite the opposite. We want you to live there ...literally, forever.

DOCTOR1

On New Augustine you will build an extraterrestrial Fountain of Youth and you too can drink from the eternal waters.

DARRYL

This is the future that “advanced” women have built for other women? After all the civilizations of men who enslaved, raped, trafficked, marginalized and traumatized countless women? Now Divina builds a colony of trafficked bio-technology workers to create eternity for her own harem.

DOCTOR1

Her Excellency Divina is a scientist like you. You should be more understanding of her long view of progress and technology for the betterment of women and humanity.

DARRYL

My husband was a scientist-- is a scientist-- he could provide you even more valuable “slave” labor had Divina not chased him out of the university and sent him into hiding two years ago.

DOCTOR2

Where is he now?

DARRYL

I was told he was sent to Ebony. I don’t know whether he is even alive.

DOCTOR2

Ebony?

DOCTOR1

Is he ... black?

DARRYL

His skin is dark like mine, maybe darker but I don’t think of him as brown or black at least I didn’t until your SMITE law created a registry of pigmentation colors and gender deviances.

You started isolating the high testosterone men of color, the Semites and then oddly the intersexuals. Why us, why them?

DOCTOR1

The project you will undertake at New Augustine is galaxies away from the work on Ebony as well as the intersex planet Hermaphrodite. But they are all connected, like friendly, distanced neighbors. As Her Excellency Divina has stated: “Separate planets make for good neighbors.”

DOCTOR2

We have learned from experimenting how to regenerate synthetically the most potent male seed and we are learning from the Hermaphrodites how to implant male reproductive functions into a female body.

DOCTOR1

Now we need from the math of the Muslim civilization and the science of the Jewish civilization-- the algorithms to extend this knowledge so that we may not actually need...

DARRYL

Men?

DOCTOR1

If you are successful, we will no longer need men to reproduce, and Divina may achieve what men have strived for and failed to realize for millennia--

DARRYL

Immortality. You need Muslim and Jewish women to invent immortality.

(BEAT changing the topic)

DOCTOR1

Curiously, your brain wave readings reveal a heightened state of what appears to be almost-- orgasmic joy.

DARRYL

You want to know if I was masturbating with my mind? Now there is a promising growth industry on a planet with no men.

DOCTOR2

Be serious with us. You are a scientist. You know that we can extract this information from you in less pleasant ways than a conversation.

DOCTOR1

(forcefully)

What did you do to counter the stress?

DARRYL

When I was a child, I suffered from terrible headaches that modern medicines and techniques could never heal because your doctors and pharmacologists never understood that stress is not a disease. It is a condition that native peoples treated with alternative methods. Native Americans used chanting, Indians-- Yoga, African tribes-- rhythmic songs and dance. The Jews use the old string instruments of the fiddle and lute to inspire joy and dance. Now you can only find most of these “obsolete” instruments as virtual artifacts in museums of “trivial” peoples.

DOCTOR2

But you had no instrument. Your arms were strapped to your sides.

DARRYL

I carry a tune in my head that has been with me since a child.

(blend of Eastern/Western music plays in the background)

My mother played violin from old Europe and my father oud from Yemen. East met West in my body and soul. This is something science cannot create or replicate, only art and only artists can create this elixir. Divina may have enslaved our minds, but she will never penetrate our souls.

(Doctors exit)

FADE TO BLACK

END OF SCENE

SCENE 4- 12TH OF AV

Darryl alone on stage in a seated yoga asana pose with legs crossed, hands touching knees but forearms facing downward. The setting is minimalist, a clean white backdrop. The sound of Darryl breathing intentionally and deeply precedes her words.

DARRYL

There is no noise while we work in New Augustine. Except my own breathing, which was always there but now is amplified and more recognizable as a song to myself. It is also a gift from others. Would I have noticed on earth with all that surrounded me and distracted me? What a simple idea that I can find in my own breath a rhythm and song birthed by my parent's instruments and commingled with Safta's ancient letters to accompany and protect me.

(music cues to the opening segment--the sounds of a single violin
in background)

DARRYL

Trained as a scientist, fated to be a worker slave it seems my true destiny is to play the pied piper... interpret and transpose the ancient sounds, songs and prayers in this vacuous place in deep space aspiring for eternity. How fitting is what I have discovered about immortality in New Augustine. It is not purely biological nor digital. It is of the spirit and through the spirit that immortality is achieved. It requires not only the chemistry of male and female DNA but the alchemy of male and female sweat, sorrow, and perseverance.

(breathing deeply and closing her eyes before resuming)

I have reached this new state of understanding with the help and support of others here and many more like Safta and those who preceded her.

(she stands and describes with passion and elaborate gestures what she sees while manipulating future virtual reality control screens)

DARRYL

I conjure layered clouds of indoor smoke hovering over ornate decorations, colorful pillows, pendent cloth banners and candlelight fixtures. Potent hues- sunburst yellow, burgundy and mandarin orange. Eastern perfumes season lingering grilled meat skewers and distract from otherwise perspiring aroma. The elliptical stage, in contrast, simple and unassuming – is nearly absent. Piercing atonal vocals accompany five-strings tied to a lute. Intermingled acoustics. The inattentive patrons are now alert. I have the tools to submit to labor by day and to conduct underground dance sessions in the worker dorms by night.

(Eastern instrumental music plays in the background. Darryl covers her face with a colorful scarf revealing only her eyes and begins to dance to the music and listen to the instructions and calls from Safta, who joins on side stage humming and chanting a hypnotic eastern tune)

SAFTA

ayrehya...naalay...vera... avera...

(Darryl moves slowly at times narrating and translating her moves and intentions)

SAFTA

hata...rana...rikooda...daphna...regila.

DARRYL

Without introduction, my two olive skinned arms emerge. Serpentine.

SAFTA

cling...tin...klan...timna...lomdim.

DARRYL

Freely levitating above mid-frame femininity. Multiple sets of eyes trace the contours of my veil without reserve for the crouching legs attached below. Arms bend at the elbow. The contortions, sensual, becoming, are slowed by conscious restraint. The shadow of movement is visible through cloth. Form mimics escapade.

(Darryl removes her veil and conjures her body in the form described by Safta for three successive Hebrew letters)

SAFTA

Lamed--Your spine arcing back, tilting a towering neck and head, soaring toward the heavens.

Mem--Hips, gyrating vertical corners, a flowing stream of multiple ravines and tributaries, defying gravity and closure.

Dalet--outstretched arms anchored by your elbows at the chest, a self embrace, a doorway to ascension...

Each movement a vestigial letter, an unspoken wonderment, patiently awaiting its revelation.

DARRYL

Counterpoised motions hypnotize and control the dignified audience. The trance is both collective and individual, allowing me to seamlessly move on and off the stage, oscillating throughout the room. At my command, they clap like a choir... de-robed.

(the crowd claps as Darryl chooses women to dance with her)

DARRYL

Some nod when I select a partner by gently placing a hand on a shoulder. The chosen readily follow my lead, novice and experienced, young and mature, alike and dissimilar. Simply a symphony... The performance conveys an insight to women, not a pleasuring to men. These textured undulations and gyrations once described as "erotic" and "Salomeaic" in the West. Such a description does not accurately convey the essence of the observed. They are unaware of their own hypnotic state. They play the role of the blind witness, ultimately comprehending, but not seeing, participating but not spectating. They see only what I intend and not merely what they imagine. To untreated masculine eyes like Josephus or Wilde, my virtuosic art – like my dreams – mistaken gestures by the West.

(the performance and music end abruptly; she returns to the seated asana pose)

DARRYL

I exit the stage and, in all respects, vanish. No one acknowledges the prior suspension of conventional time. Each conceals an unspoken version of the twenty-two sumptuous minutes, like a rendezvous with a secret lover—a selfish and insatiable memory. People resume their conversations about forced work as if there is no interruption. The trance is broken.

(she turns her arm upward and pulls up the sleeves revealing there is no longer a tattoo on her arm.)

DARRYL

I arrived in New Augustine with a coded music score from generations past to heal me from this trauma.

(BEAT)

I can share this with others at our collective time of need. We will unchain the enslaved, remove the scars and replace them with what we alone can create--eternal life.

FADE TO BLACK

END OF PLAY

THE PLAYWRIGHT SPEAKS:

New Augustine explores how on the same date in multiple centuries, Jews were persecuted and expelled from different countries. I wrote New Augustine as an allegory after witnessing the present-day traumas of the alt-right Charlottesville rally, the Muslim airport travel bans, the caging of immigrant children at the U.S.- Mexican border, etc. In the play, I heightened the stakes by having all Semites and other “misfits” expelled, showing how terror can spread yet often create new circumstances for understanding and embracing “the other.” I also revisited the slogan-- “The Future is Female,” as my humble take on the kind of future female leaders we need to address our global calamities. This is a recurring source of my own cautious optimism about the future, despite the influence from writers of dystopia from around the world loudly beating an alarming drum: Edward Bond, Margaret Atwood, Octavia Butler, Roberto Bolero to name a few. My internal tripwire was “tripped” long before January 6th. As renowned futurist Alvin Toffler shared: “To the rigorous disciplines of science, we must add the flaming imagination of art.”

AUTHOR BIO: Wayne L. Firestone is an alumnus of the past four (2019-2022) John F. Kennedy Center Immersive Playwriting Workshops in Washington, DC. In February 2022, he successfully completed the London, UK based 28 Plays Later challenge--writing 28 short plays in 28 days. In March 2022, he was named the Jewish Plays Project inaugural 21st Century Playwright Fellow and is resident in San Juan, Puerto Rico for a year-long playwriting sabbatical.

Recent plays and publications include: Rogue Theatre Festival: “Rise Esperanto,” One-Act, December 2020; Urban Stages Acronym Plays: “JLS,” August 2020; Take Ten Festival-Between Us Productions at the Secret Theatre: “Madame Magician,” April 2020 (postponed) and Queans Theatre Festival, UK (digital) August 2020; Fifth Avenue Theatre Festival, NY (December 2020); Loud Voices Silent Streets Festival, UK (February 2021) and Hear Me Out Monologue Festival (April 2022): “Shana the She-Pirate,” Rogue Theatre Festival- Players Theatre, NY: “Fallen Man,” July 2021, Players Theatre Shorts Festival, NY June, 2021. Chain Theatre One Act Festival, NY: “Still Life on Campus,” February, 2022; Players Theatre “Luv” Fest: “Spring Brides, Circa 2020,” NY February 2022; Rogue Theatre Festival: “State of Dis’Union,” July 2022 (co-written with Sharon Goldner); Capital Fringe: “Higher,” July 2022 ; “The Mirror,” (short play for publication) Review Americana, Volume 17, Issue 1, Spring 2022; “Just Breathing,” Contemporary One Minute Monologues (online publication at Lulu.com) 2022.

