

Benjamin-Ebenezer Kwabena Tawiah Mfofo-M'Carthy:
Obaaberima: an introduction

As a theatre artist, my work has been greatly influenced by the constant negotiation between my Ghanaian heritage and my now Canadian identity. Creating worlds that make room for all these aspects of my identity, Black, African, Queer, Ghanaian, Canadian, Immigrant to exist in truth is what inspires me as an Artist in theatre. As a creator I have had the opportunities of creating solo and collective works with other artists. These experiences have afforded me the opportunity to share stories, learn, create and practice theatre in its various forms with a vision. Creating new work, telling and/or retelling stories with new narratives, new voices, new faces, new bodies, is what drives me as an artist. And creating **Obaaberima** was my active effort to make room for my “otherness” to be seen reflected in the stories we tell and share in theatre. **Obaaberima** is a call, an introduction, an outdoorings...

***Sibongile:** Wafra mo mobra mobra mobra
Wafra mo mobra mobra mobra Wafra mo mobra mobra mobra
Yebedi agoro
Yebedi agoro
Yebedi agoro*

Where I come from, when a child is a born, they are kept indoors for no less than 7days. If that child makes it through the first week, then the beginning of their life is marked by a ceremony called “out-dooring”: a naming ceremony at which the child is brought out of the house, is introduced to family, friends, and the community. The child will taste water and alcohol for the first time to learn that though they might look the same, they are different and to never lie about what is true. The child is then given a name that tells of where they are from and who they are to be.

(Obaaberima)

***Young Agyeman:** Black dress, with the butterfly buckle hook wrapped around my waist
and tighten, tighten, tighten
Red high heels with a shiny glow and a rose on its toe,
Room at the back of my heel, room to grow,
Not yet grown as a woman to fit into,
...Not yet grown as a man not to want to*

(Obaaberima)

The title of the play, **Obaaberima** a derogatory slang term, which means Girlboy or girlyboy when translated from Twi, a dialect from Ghana. It is a playground taunt that takes on a new meaning for young Agyeman, the main character of the play, after he befriends Opayin, his elder, and a talior.

***Opayin:**When nipa; humankind was first created by O’Nyame; the great one, nipa was both Obaa and Oberima in one like O’Nyame, the great one. It says so in the bible, in Genesis chapter 1; O’Nyame said, “Let Us make humankind in Our own image, according to Our likeness; let Onipa have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.” So humankind was created, in the image of O’Nyame; male and female, Oberima and Obaa...” But with time all that has been forgotten, our fear of the power we hold within*

has limited our ability to fully understand and honor who we are. You are as perfect as you were made to be.

(Obaaberima)

Young Agyeman commits part of himself to Opayin, loving him as obaa/girl, their relationship gets threatened when Agyeman meets and falls in love with a fellow schoolmate, Nana Osei. Agyeman gets thrown into a world of roleplay, which leaves him lost as a person, hurting the people he loves. A scholarship to study in Canada becomes an opportunity to start his life over. Agyeman vows to become the man he was named to be; Agyeman, he who saves nations. Agyeman becomes a lawyer at the age of 24, He meets Ayele a Ghanaian girl in Canada that whom she starts dating. Agyeman meets Elijah a Canadian boy from North Bay, they fall in-love. Agyeman falls back into the cycle of lies and roleplay. At the age of 27 Agyeman finds himself in a Canadian jail. Which is where we meet him at the beginning of the play, 1222 days later on the eve of his release from prison. He welcomes the audience to his staged outdooring. He takes us back on a journey, chronicling the persons he has been, so he can re-introducing himself to the world.

Sibongile:*This orange looks good on me...I think it's because of the colour of my skin.*

I was scared my first night here.

I had heard stories of what happens to men like me within walls like these.

I also heard stories of how men like me rule within walls like these. And I have always wanted to rule in heels.

I have been in here one thousand one hundred and twenty two days, and I have paid my dues within these walls, dressing like everyone else. But now, I wear it like this because it's the only way it fits me right, I wear it like this because it looks good on me. And, if you are looking at me thinking, Poor boy, he must be someone's bitch, well, this is my story, and mine is not yours to pity. This is MY outdooring. The doors are about to open, and I can no longer slide through. The doors are about to open, and I need to be seen. Watch me walk.

(Obaaberima)

Obaaberima was created using both African and Western theatre traditions, combining dance, movement, live music, storytelling and poetry together with theatrical design and structure. I grew up in Ghana, where I trained in tradition Ghanaian dance, and performed the works of prominent African writers. When I moved to Canada in 1998, I wanted to be an actor. I trained at York University, where I learned to speak the words of others and tell the stories of others, and later realized no one was telling the story of those like me: Black, African, Ghanaian, Canadian, Queer, Immigrant. With ***Obaaberima*** I wanted to tell a story that held the truth of my often-conflicting identities and experiences. Over a period of four years, working in collaboration with director Evalyn Parry, musician and composer Kobena Aquaa Harrison, Buddies in Bad Times Theatre and artistic director Brendan Healy, we created a piece of theatre that tells the unique story of a contemporary African man, trying to navigate continents, gender, race and sexuality.

TAWIAH BEN M'CARTHY

Tawiah Ben M'Carthy is a Ghanaian born, Toronto based theatre artist, notable as a Dora nominated actor and playwright. In his practice, Tawiah uses both African and Western theatre traditions, combining movement, music, storytelling, poetry together with theatrical structure, characterization and design. His playwright/creator/performer credits include

Blue Bird, Black Boys, Body 13, Obaaberima (Dora for Best Production) and The Kente Cloth (Outstanding performance, NOW magazine, Summerworks 2008). Tawiah has worked with theatre companies such as, The National Arts Centre of Canada, The Cultch Vancouver, Buddies In Bad Times Theatre, Obsidian Theatre, MTSpace Theatre and InterArts Matrix as actor, playwright and/or director. He also works as a theatre workshop facilitator, with various organizations across the country. As a director, Tawiah mentored with Philip Akin and Sarah Stanley as part of Obsidian's MAP program. He is the director of Blue Bird Theatre Collective's *Bush of Ghost*, a new devised theatre piece based on Amos Tutuala's novel *My Life in the Bush of Ghost*, currently in its development workshop phase. Tawiah trained as an actor in the acting conservatory BFA program at York University in Toronto and is a founding member of Blue Bird Theatre Collective and Saga Collectif.

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