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A PLACE FOR WE

by Archie Maddocks

SAMUEL FRENCH

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The World Premiere of *A Place for We* took place at Park Theatre, London Artistic Director Jez Bond; Executive Director Rachael Williams) on 7 Oct 2021 as a co-production with Talawa Theatre Company (Artistic Director Michael Buffong; Executive Director Carolyn ML Forsyth). Set & Costume Designer Louie Whitemore, Lighting Designer Sherry Coenen, Sound Designer Tony Gayle, Dialect Coach Hazel Holder, Associate Sound Designer Bella Kear, Assistant Director Lo Feliciani Ojeda, Production Manager Jerome Reid, Production Electrician & Programmer Jake Lawrence, Costume Supervisor Claire Nicolas, Costume Assistant András Jacobs, Producer Daniel Cooper, Company Stage Manager Kala Simpson, Assistant Stage Manager Emily Mei Ling Pearce**.** Stage Management Intern Tayla Hunter. The cast was as follows:

YOUNG CLARENCE JAMES.....Harold Addo
GEORGE O'DRISCOLL/AUSTIN/ANGUS .....Blake Harrison
ANNA O'DRISCOLL/VIOLET..... Joanna Horton
TASHA/ESME .....Kirsty Oswald
KERON JAMES ..... Laurence Ubong Williams
CLARENCE JAMES/ELMORN JAMES.....David Webber

A NOTE FROM THE WRITER

Things *always* change.

That's the nature of society. It's what we, as humans, do. It's in our nature as a species to constantly move, shift, innovate, adapt. That's why we have created what we have and live in the places we do. It's how we got out of the food chain (thank god for that!).

However, change is not readily accepted by those that it is negatively affecting. Why would it be? It means having to adapt to something you don't understand, when in essence, that very changeability is threatening your existence. Why would you welcome that? It's a perfectly understandable reaction to grasp. We have a tendency to want to reject change. It's represents the unknown and for most, the unknown is a terrifying concept – one which almost always leads someone to assume that the worst is going to happen.

With *A Place for We*, I wanted to look at the nature of change and how it affects the people that it happens to. More specifically, I wanted to look at how the ever changing demographic of both people and money may affect an ever evolving area and a constantly reinventing community. The term now is gentrification. However, that kind of shift, new people moving in and old people moving out, has always happened, particularly in cities. Where gentrification as a concept is flawed is the speed at which it happens, it's so rapid that it doesn't allow for people to adapt, which can (in my opinion) lead to the erosion of community… as we knew it anyway.

With more money comes the ability to change things more quickly. And with that speed, that's where things (and people) become lost in the ever-swelling sea of development.

This play came from a moment when I was about twenty two or so. I was working at an undertakers' at the time so was fully immersed in that world. One day, I was walking to Brixton Village, I had a friend that worked in there. Walking through Brixton, I saw what I had always seen when I visited the area, a vast mix but clearly defined community of people. Stepping into Brixton Village though, I saw *different* people. They were mostly white, obviously middle class and completely oblivious to the Brixton that I knew. Even more weird, I hadn't seen any of them outside of the market, so my main question was whether or not they had just teleported in. The moment has stuck with me because it was the first time I properly noticed gentrification like that. I'd seen Hackney fall, and been in and around Portobello when things started to become more upmarket. However, I had never seen the shift happen so quickly. And it made me wonder what happens to those people that either can't, or won't change? Do they just get left behind? Does everything that they had just disappear? And, more importantly, does anyone remember them or care about what they left behind?

It's a question I still ask today as someone who both benefits from encroaching gentrification (used to only go to Hackney to get shot at, now it's where I get my vegan chicken) and laments its ravenous appetite.

I'd always been fascinated by the things we let go and the things we keep. Additionally, I've always been interested by the things we keep up, just because it's what we always do. That's partly what this play aims to discuss. The little traditions that we keep up, even if we don't fully understand them. When it comes down to it, the question I ask myself is who are those traditions for, and why do they keep them going if we don't fully understand what they are?

I think that they're for the people that came before us and keeping them going is our unwitting way of honouring them. So even though we don't remember, in a weird way, they aren't forgotten.

Archie Maddocks

A NOTE FROM THE DIRECTOR

I first came across *A Place for We* as part of Talawa Firsts, our new writing festival, which has proved to be a great platform for some of the most exciting Black writers in the country. We knew there was something special about *A Place for We*, and indeed about Archie as a writer. The story is humorous but also has great depth and is so layered that the simplest questions asked by a character provide a springboard for myriad thoughts and even more questions about the places we call home, and about identity and belonging.

As I look at the brick work at Park Theatre, where this was performed, I realise that this place also contains the essence of this play within its structure; the history and stories witnessed by these walls. The movement of the people through this area, each trying to make a living for themselves and their families, battling with life and all it throws at them. The bricks remain the same, so it seems do the aims of the people within the walls. Each outgoing occupant sees the incoming as different, threatening, yet their wants and needs are so similar as to be comical.

This does not pardon the injustice of gentrification. The injustice is common to all no matter who is carrying out the gentrification; cheap property is lost at the expense of one community or another, the incoming culture replaces that of the outgoing communities. Whether a coffee shop replaces a grocer specialising in traditional fruit and vegetables, there are winners and losers in this scenario. It is a difficult and ongoing conundrum.

It is great to be back in a theatre, at Park Theatre especially, a space where we can laugh and cry together as we grapple with the difficult questions posed by this most enthralling writer.

Michael Buffong, Director
Artistic Director, Talawa Theatre

CHARACTERS

CLARENCE JAMES –60s. Defiant. Black.

KERON JAMES – Late 20s/early 30s. Lost pessimist. Mixed Race.

TASHA – Late 20s. Sharp as a tack, but has no idea – an optimist. White.

VIOLET – 30s. Nervous of offending.

AUSTIN – 30s. Overconfident, newly enlightened.

GEORGE O'DRISCOLL – Late 30s. Bullish. A pub philosopher.

ANNA O'DRISCOLL – 30s. End of her tether. A realist.

YOUNG CLARENCE JAMES – 13. Shy and unsure.

ESME – Late 20s. Middle Class, knows it.

ANGUS – 30s. Middle Class, doesn't know it.

TIME & SETTING

A Place for We is set in one building in Brixton, beginning in 1971 and spanning up until 2021.

AUTHOR'S NOTES

A slash [/] indicates overlap in speech.

A dash [–] indicates cut off speech.

An ellipsis […] indicates unvoiced thought.

Speech in **bold** indicates Trinidadian accent.

ACT ONE

(A funeral directors. Nine Nights.)

(Downstage sits some comfortable chairs, an elegant table – a greeting area for the grieving to wait. To the left is the front door – a bell chimes whenever this door is opened.)

(Upstage is a large wooden desk. On its surface, a phone, a stack of cards and a computer. Upstage right is a door to the office.)

(Upstage left, a door to a small morgue, where the newly prepared, or yet to be prepared cadavers are kept before service.)

(A picture of Elmorn James, the founder of Nine Nights, sits on the back wall.)

(A candle sits against a pillar.)

(A stack of mail sits inside the front door.)

Scene One

*(**KERON JAMES**, wearing house clothes, enters through the front door.)*

(He goes to the front door and picks up the mail and flicks through the envelopes, before pausing on one for a while.)

(He opens it. It takes a while for him to read.)

(He huffs loudly and shakes his head before placing the letter back in the envelope. He puts the letters on the table.)

(He goes to leave before remembering something. He turns back, lighting the candle. He huffs once more and exits to the morgue.)

(The song in the style of "Pon Di Cocky" by Aidonia plays.)*

*(**KERON** re-enters, wearing an apron and plastic gloves, pulling a coffin behind him.)*

(He goes into the office, returning with a picture, some jewellery, a cross, a Trinidadian flag and a bottle of rum. Returning to the coffin, he opens it recoils and loudly sounds his disgust, slamming the lid down.)

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(He takes a deep breath and opens the lid again and recoils once more, clearly holding vomit in his mouth. He tries to arrange the body but it's too much for him. He exits to the office.)

*(***CLARENCE JAMES***, impeccably dressed, enters through the front door.)*

CLARENCE. Keron? *(Shouting.)* **Keron!**

KERON. In the back /

CLARENCE. **Keron! Keron! Keron! Keron!**

(The music switches off, **KERON** *appears in the doorway, holding a packet of crystals.)*

KERON. Yes dad?

CLARENCE. **What di ass is this song?**

KERON. What?

CLARENCE. **Sit down pon di cocky?**

KERON. You like it?

CLARENCE. This is a nice old woman!

KERON. The beat is wicked though –

CLARENCE. Have some respect boy!

KERON. Just a song Dad. It's weird if I'm here alone and it's quiet.

CLARENCE. ***Pon di cocky*? Lawd farder forgive yuh fuh such foolishness!**

*(***CLARENCE** *steups.)*

If you have to play something, play something she would appreciate. She like Calypso –

*(***KERON** *approaches the coffin again, gags.)*

Wap'en to'yuh?

KERON. She stinks man!

CLARENCE. Since when are your lungs weak?

KERON. They ain't, but she does –

CLARENCE. She's dead. What, you want her to smell like a flower bed?

KERON. Come if you don't believe me.

*(***CLARENCE** *comes closer and is hit.)*

CLARENCE. It's... It's not that bad. A little...pungent...but not that... **Why she look like so?**

KERON. Best I could do by myself.

CLARENCE. That's the best you could do? She's a little old woman.

KERON. She's meaty man.

*(***CLARENCE** *grunts.)*

(He goes to one side of the coffin, **KERON** *to the other side. They rearrange the body until* **CLARENCE** *is satisfied.* **KERON** *promptly sprinkles the crystals in the coffin.)*

CLARENCE. Lid.

*(***KERON** *quickly places the lid over the coffin.)*

KERON. Much better. I'll take her to the yard until we're ready for the service, let me get the car ready.

*(***KERON** *grabs the car keys and exits.)*

*(***CLARENCE** *stands over the coffin and puts his hand on it. He lingers. He opens it and places the lid down.)*

CLARENCE. **Rest in Power Miss Angie. Say hello to Daddy. I hope he… Sleep well.**

*(**CLARENCE** places the lid over the coffin and bows. He lingers next to it, as if he has more to discuss.)*

*(**KERON** comes through the door.)*

KERON. What you doing?

CLARENCE. **Nuttin…** Nothing.

KERON. Can I take her or would you like a further moment alone?

*(**CLARENCE** moves away.)*

*(**KERON** wheels the coffin out the door.)*

*(**CLARENCE** sits at the desk and begins to sift through the mail. He comes to the open letter. He takes it out and reads it.)*

CLARENCE. *(To himself.)* **Fucking Corbeau.**

*(**KERON** comes through the door. **CLARENCE** stuffs the letter into his pocket.)*

KERON. She was more than a bit meaty. Dropped the car down a couple inches… What you doing?

CLARENCE. What?

KERON. That…the letter you –

CLARENCE. **Private business, yuh understand? A man cyaa take care of he private business in he own shop?**

*(**KERON** backs off.)*

You hungry?

*(**KERON** nods noncommittally.)*

Go to the doubles man for me. Two doubles, plenty pepper.

KERON. You can't go?

CLARENCE. You really going to make a tired old West Indian Negro walk through the winter conditions?

KERON. You were born in Battersea.

CLARENCE. **Is my *blood* from Battersea?** Go to the shop for me.

KERON. Fine.

*(***KERON** *turns to go.)*

CLARENCE. And get me a couple of roti skin too. Couple Dhalpouri. Couple buss-up-shot.

KERON. Fine.

*(***KERON** *turns and leaves out of the door.)*

*(***CLARENCE** *takes the letter back out of his pocket.)*

CLARENCE. **Yuh see this daddy? These people rel crazy. Offer anything to try and take we out –**

*(***TASHA** *walks through the front door, carrying a binder.* **CLARENCE** *stuffs the letter back into his pocket, startled.)*

Oh gosh! Where you come from?!

TASHA. Morning to you too Dad. I *do* live here.. And work here.

CLARENCE. If you work here then why are you late?

TASHA. Had some stuff to get done for Keron didn't I. Where is he?

CLARENCE. Doubles man.

TASHA. Right, well, when he gets back, here's the pricing changes he asked for.

CLARENCE. What?

TASHA. He didn't tell ya?

CLARENCE. **Nobody tell me a dyam thing about nuttin.**

TASHA. Well here, I think they're good – just a couple of the wordings for stuff and that – are you sure he didn't tell ya?

*(***CLARENCE** *grunts.)*

*(***TASHA** *hands over the binder.* **CLARENCE** *looks them over. He lowers the binder, confused.)*

CLARENCE. What. Is. This?

TASHA. Pricing changes.

CLARENCE. Is this a joke?

TASHA. I don't think so. But you know him, his sense of humour is weird. He laughs at a lot of stuff and just, like, what's he laughing at, that's literally the opposite of –

CLARENCE. **This foolish boy!**

TASHA. So, I'm guessing you don't like it?

*(***CLARENCE** *steups.)*

I think updates are good. Unless it's an iPhone, then you may as well just get a new phone.

CLARENCE. Update? Nine Nights is a traditional funeral directors, not a –

*(***KERON** *walks through the door.)*

KERON. You ain't gonna be happy with – oh, hi babe. Didn't hear you leave this morning.

TASHA. All my ninja training babe.

(They kiss.)

Good luck.

KERON. With what?

CLARENCE. Damn right I'm not happy /

TASHA. He ain't happy.

KERON. I did the best I could.

*(***KERON** *hands him a roll in silver foil.* **CLARENCE** *looks from the roll to* **KERON**.*)*

Breakfast burrito.

CLARENCE. What is a breakfast borringo?

KERON. Burrito –

CLARENCE. Ah, they're well nice. That's from the new place down in the –

KERON. Yeah down in the village. Took over from Motaz.

TASHA. The butcher?

KERON. Yeah.

TASHA. At least that's one less person to stare at my chesticles. When did he go?

KERON. Couple months ago. He's gone down Sydenham, cheaper, more people to –

CLARENCE. **What di ass is a breakfast borringo!**

KERON. It's kind of like a Mexican roti.

CLARENCE. **Eh-eh. I never ask for this!**

KERON. Best I could do –

CLARENCE. Best I could do – what does that mean, best I could do?

KERON. Best I could… Island Life is closed, so that was the best I –

CLARENCE. What?!

KERON. It's closed. So a burrito was the best I –

CLARENCE. Closed? Since when?

TASHA. Recently. Couple weeks maybe.

CLARENCE. What?

TASHA. Yeah. That mental homeless man keeps trying to squat in there.

KERON. Jossiah ain't mental.

TASHA. The other day he was eating a pigeon in the square. With the feathers.

KERON. Yeah… Well… Innovation init. Waste not want not, all that kind of thing.

CLARENCE. Island Life really closed down? It's been here since nineteen sixty-eight. That long and it just close?

KERON. Like I said. Best I could do.

CLARENCE. And you got this from?

TASHA. From where Motaz was. New shop.

CLARENCE. **Mexican? There's no Mexican people round here.**

TASHA. People like Mexican food. It's fashionable.

*(***CLARENCE** *throws the burrito in the bin.)*

KERON. What you do that for? That was eight pound!

CLARENCE. Eight pound! For bread and meat?

TASHA. And rice and peppers and Gua… Sorry.

CLARENCE. **Ah doh wan this. Ah won't eat any of they food. Yuh understand?**

KERON. *(Shrugging.)* Go hungry then.

*(***KERON** *takes the burrito out of the bin and puts it back in the bag.)*

*(***TASHA** *and* **CLARENCE** *look at him, disgusted.)*

What, we can afford to be throwing away money now?

(Beat.)

TASHA. To be fair, they are quite nice. Maybe you should –

CLARENCE. I don't want none of their food.

*(***CLARENCE** *steups and sulks off to the office.)*

KERON. Just leave him. He'll eat if he's hungry. Looks like we've got a fun day ahead.

TASHA. You know how people can get when their favourite places.

*(***KERON** *offers a burrito.)*

No thanks, I don't eat out of bins.

KERON. Babe, you're eating for two now remember?

*(***TASHA** *punches him in the arm.)*

TASHA. Alright dickhead, you want him to hear?

KERON. Gonna have to tell him sometime.

TASHA. Yeah but, babe, you have to pick your moments. That's your problem, you can't pick your moments.

KERON. Fine, well… Whenever you're ready.

TASHA. Bad luck to say too soon anyway.

KERON. Well, if we leave it too long –

TASHA. We ain't gonna leave it too long. Idiot. You think I'm just gonna rock up big belly and waddles and be like "guess who's gonna be a grandad?"

*(**KERON** laughs, kisses her on the forehead and hands her the burrito. She switches hers with his.)*

(They start to eat.)

You do realise this baby is going to be mostly white?

KERON. I'm aware of the science yes.

TASHA. But like, there's a chance it's gonna come out looking proper white. Like premium package white. Blue eyes, blonde hair.

KERON. Like a Nazi?

TASHA. Did you just call our baby a Nazi?

KERON. You're the one who said they might look like –

TASHA. Can you stop calling the baby a Nazi please. She's impressionable.

KERON. She?

TASHA. Feels like a she. Has a feminine energy.

KERON. What if it's just a very camp boy? I feel like you shouldn't be assuming their gender –

TASHA. It's a she!

*(**KERON** laughs.)*

Anyway, you'll probably want to prepare him for that.

KERON. It'll be fine. He don't care about stuff like that. Just be happy that his 'legacy' is continuing.

*(**TASHA** grunts, then.)*

TASHA. Mum was saying that we're welcome to move in there. Much more space.

KERON. What's wrong with here?

TASHA. You want to raise a baby above an undertakers?

KERON. Why not?

TASHA. I'm sorry, shall we just give them a gun and send them into a school too? They'll be weird.

KERON. What about me?

TASHA. *You're* weird.

KERON. Yeah, well… Cross that bridge when we come to it.

(Pause.)

TASHA. Oh, pricing changes.

(She slides them over to him.)

I had a little look through them and I reckon they look alright. I thought you told your dad?

KERON. I *mentioned* it.

TASHA. Well, when I showed them to him –

KERON. He saw them?

TASHA. Weren't too happy –

KERON. What did he say?

TASHA. Well –

KERON. Oh, you know what? Forget what he… They look good.

TASHA. Yeah.

KERON. Updates it nicely, right?

TASHA. Wholeheartedly concur babe… Word of the day toilet paper.

KERON. So, what did he say?

TASHA. Didn't like it.

*(***CLARENCE** *bursts out of the office.)*

CLARENCE. **What kind of Trinidadian go out for doubles and roti, and come back with one Mexican ting and try say /**

KERON. It was the best I could do pops /

CLARENCE. **Come back with nuttin and try say the shop gone.**

KERON. OK, next time, I'll bring back nothing instead.

CLARENCE. **What kind of Trinidadian bring back –**

KERON. Please don't start –

CLARENCE. **Shamed! This bwoi try an bring shame pon mi!**

KERON. Stop being so dramatic please.

CLARENCE. **Dramatic? Yuh tink ah dramatic?**

KERON. Just a touch. Little, tiny morsel of…

*(***CLARENCE** *doesn't see the funny side.)*

Sorry.

CLARENCE. I don't want a sorry.

(Beat.)

KERON. Tash, er… Tash said you saw the pricing changes?

*(***CLARENCE** *snorts.)*

So… That means you don't like it?

*(***CLARENCE** *steups.)*

What's wrong with a little update?