An Introduction to Steve Carter's *Eden*

By Tia Smith

With *Eden*, playwright Steve Carter showcased the long-lasting effects of slavery and colonization on the Black diaspora. Carter, who believed that every play is autobiographical, took inspiration from his family history.[1] Carter was born Horace E. Carter, Jr. in 1929 to a Trinidadian-born mother and a Black American father from Richmond, Virginia. Raised in San Juan Hill, Manhattan, Carter experienced the divisions between Caribbeans and Black Americans firsthand. "In fact, the block he grew up on was split—half of it was American blacks, the other half immigrant West Indians," writes critic Scott Fosdick.[2] Carter's paternal grandfather, a Garveyite, condemned his parents' interethnic marriage, pushing Carter's father to leave his family.[3]

"[I]t was the first time a colored man had told me that I wasn't good enough for his daughter. I got to thinking that I was going to go through my whole life being just no good in the eyes of everybody," proclaims Eustace Baylor, the Southern protagonist of Carter's 1967 one-act play, *One Last Look*, to his former lover Annette.[4] Though written first, *One Last Look* serves as a coda to *Eden*, in which younger versions of Eustace and Annette reappear. In 1985, Carter wrote a yet to be produced screenplay adaptation of these two plays for Tobias Pictures.[5]

In 1968, Carter joined the Negro Ensemble Company (NEC)—the preeminent Black theater company of the late 20th century. The following year, he became Director of the Playwright's Workshop. He mentored a generation of Black playwrights that included acclaimed actor-dramatist-television producer Samm-Art Williams, who portrayed Eustace in the original production of *Eden*. During Carter's NEC tenure, his other roles included: literary manager,

Playwright-in Residence, "costume and set designer, ticket-taker," production coordinator, maintenance man,[6] and, on the opening night of *Eden*, elevator operator.[7]

The NEC staged the first two plays of Carter's *Caribbean Trilogy—Eden* and *Nevis Mountain Dew* in 1978. The former premiered off-Broadway at the St. Mark's Playhouse on March 3, 1976. In *Eden*, next-door neighbors, Eustace and Annetta, secretly pursue a romance in the summer of 1927 against the wishes of Annetta's father, Joseph Barton. Joseph, entrenched in Marcus Garvey's waning Back to Africa Movement, resentful towards Black Americans who have decried the Movement's Jamaican-born leader, enforces a detrimental racial regime in his household, where West Indians are superior to Southern Black Americans.

Eden revealed not only how Black people see ourselves but how we see each other. The play's resonance resulted in a twice-extended run and transfer to a larger theater, which totaled 181 performances. The Outer Critics Circle unanimously awarded Carter with the John Gassner Playwriting Medallion for Most Promising Playwright,[8] and *Eden* was awarded four AUDELCO Awards, including Play of the Year.[9]

When the now-legendary director Chuck Smith saw the NEC production, he wrote to Carter a week later to request the rights to produce *Eden* in Chicago.[10] Smith would go on to direct the entire *Caribbean Trilogy* at Victory Gardens Theater, including the world premiere of the final play, *Dame Lorraine*, which starred Carter's friend and fellow NEC member Esther Rolle, in 1981. That year, Carter left the NEC to become the first Playwright-in-Residence at Victory Gardens. According to Smith, *Eden* highlighted that Black people are, in fact, not monolithic.[11]

Joseph Barton, the West Indian patriarch, asserts knowledge as our greatest weapon against white supremacy. Eustace, the Southern migrant, argues that knowledge cannot save us

from the racial violence that he has witnessed in the South. Joseph defines Blackness by ethnicity and ideals. Eustace defines it by phenotype. To Joseph, freedom resides in the creation of a Black state. To his daughter Annetta and her mother, Florie, freedom is the power to choose who you love; moreover, it is the power to choose to be loved by others. It is the ability for women whose lives are sacrificed for the Movement to honor their sexual desires.

"I think a play like 'Eden' is long over due [sic]. The theme to bring West Indian blacks and black Americans together should be a part of every black writers [sic] work," wrote a woman of West Indian descent to Carter upon watching *Eden* in 1976.[12] *Eden* exposes how our own paths to freedom can inhibit the freedom of the ones we love. With his play, Carter aspired for Caribbeans and Black Americans to understand each other.[13] Since its premiere, the ethnic diversity of Black America has only grown, encompassing millions who hail from Latin America, the Caribbean, and Africa. *Eden* asks us to see each other's humanity, our distinct cultures, and our shared histories. Carter envisioned a future in which the multifacetedness of the Black diaspora is made visible to aid, rather than hinder, our collective freedom.

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Notes

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4. Carter, Steve. "One Last Look." *Plays*, Broadway Play Publishing, Inc, 1986, pp. 81-104.
5. Arkatov, Janice. "Steve Carter's 'Eden': Intimate Portrait of Family Racism." *Los Angeles Times*, 2 June 1989, www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1989-06-02-ca-1151-story.html. Accessed 10 Dec. 2024.
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7. Nesmith, Nathaniel G. "The Life of a Playwright: An Interview with Steve Carter." New England Review, vol. 37, no. 2, 2016, pp. 137-50, JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/24772501.

8. Freeman, Charles K. Letter awarding Steve Carter with Outer Critics Circle Award. 25 May 1976. Negro Ensemble Company records. Sc MG 345, Box 28, Folder 4. Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library, New York, New York.
9. Robinson, Vivian. "The First Ten Years of AUDELCO." *Black American Literature Forum*, vol. 17, no. 2, 1983, pp. 79–81. *JSTOR*, doi.org/10.2307/2904584.
10. Smith, Charles N. Letter to Steve Carter. 24 Apr. 1976. Negro Ensemble Company records. Sc MG 345, Box 28, Folder 2. Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library, New York, New York.
11. Smith, Charles. Charles "Chuck" Smith (The HistoryMakers A2005.167), interviewed by Larry Crowe. 18 July 2005, The HistoryMakers Digital Archive. Session 1, tape 3 story 8, Charles "Chuck" Smith comments on his directing career after leaving X-BAG Theatre.
12. Taitt, Hazel. Letter to Steve Carter. 27 Mar. 1976. Negro Ensemble Company records. Sc MG 345, Box 28, Folder 4. Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library, New York, New York.
13. Nesmith. "The Life of a Playwright: An Interview with Steve Carter."