

Smithsonian Institution

National Museum of African American History and Culture

## Playbill for A Raisin in the Sun with insert essay 'Sweet Lorraine'

Extracted on Apr-16-2024 01:10:10

The Smithsonian Institution thanks all digital volunteers that transcribed and reviewed this material. Your work enriches Smithsonian collections, making them available to anyone with an interest in using them.

The Smithsonian Institution (the "Smithsonian") provides the content on this website (transcription.si.edu), other Smithsonian websites, and third-party sites on which it maintains a presence ("SI Websites") in support of its mission for the "increase and diffusion of knowledge." The Smithsonian invites visitors to use its online content for personal, educational and other non-commercial purposes. By using this website, you accept and agree to abide by the following terms.

- If sharing the material in personal and educational contexts, please cite the National Museum of African American History and Culture as source of the content and the project title as provided at the top of the document. Include the accession number or collection name; when possible, link to the National Museum of African American History and Culture website.
- If you wish to use this material in a for-profit publication, exhibition, or online project, please contact National Museum of African American History and Culture or transcribe@si.edu

For more information on this project and related material, contact the National Museum of African American History and Culture. See this project and other collections in the Smithsonian Transcription Center.

## [[image]] Mighty Men

JAMES FRANCO and CHRIS O'DOWD get a Steinbeck classic back on the boards for the first time in 40 years, and it's Anna D. Shapiro's job to bring out "the maleness of the story" by Robert Simonson

John Steinbeck's Of Mice and Men is a classic so ingrained in the American psyche that it should come as no surprise that both the director and star of the new Broadway production-based on the 1937 play version of the novel-have a longstanding personal relationship with the text.

"He was writing about California, which is interesting to me", says James Franco, the hyperactively polymathic Hollywood actor, who makes his Broadway debut in the production. He was born and raised in Palo Alto, Calif -not too far from the Depression-era fields worked by George Milton and Lennie Small, the itinerant workers at the center of the story. Franco feels a connection with the duo, as well as figures found throughout the Steinbeck canon. "I think I could identify with a lot of the characters," he says. "They have this way of life that they were sort of okay without any approval from any authority figures. All these characters had created their own ideal worlds in circumstances that you wouldn't think were very ideal. When I was very young, that was very appealing to me. Before I declared I wanted to be an actor, I wanted to be a marine zoologist like Doc in 'Cannery row'. When I got a little older, I realized it's not exactly the marine zoology that I like about his character. Its the way he turned his work into art, almost, and the way he conducts himself as a person. What I realized was that I wanted to be an actor and play characters like Doc, rather than be Doc." Meanwhile director Anna D. Shapiro-best known for staging Tracy Letts's towering August: Osage County to Tony-winning effect-says, "My relationship to Steinbeck started when I was in my early teens and I saw Of Mice and Men at Steppenwolf. Strangely-and I know it's not possible that I had read it before-but PLAYBILL.COM

even then it felt so familiar to me, so inevitable. It's a story and a cast of characters that I think lives in the collective unconscious of Americans my age and a bit older".

You might imagine the production's Lennie, Chris O'Dowd, who was born and raised in Ireland, would not have had the same close relationship with the novelist while growing up. You'd be wrong. "We studied it in school, I remember," he says. "It was in the syllabus. I remember reading The Pearl as well. The Grapes of Wrath- I know we did that. I guess that teacher was just a Steinbeck fan." A 21st-century production of Of Mice and Men has been a prospect for

some years now, but has stubbornly refused to gel until now. "I had been involved several years ago-with different producers-and was heartbroken when it fell apart at the last minute," says Shapiro. Franco, too, remembers a past conversation with producers and Shapiro about the acting in the play. "It's had different incarnations," he recalls of the project. "For whatever reason, it fell through."

[[image]]Anna D. Shapiro

Then producer David Binder gained the rights to the play and approached him a second time, it seemed destined to be. "I was ready to do it," says Franco. "Anna wasn't on board yet. I had been flirting with Broadway. It was just something that I wanted to do. There had been a





couple of productions that I talked to people about. Then this came back around. I thought, 'this is probably it." Franco then spoke to Shapiro. ("I'm pretty sure he was interviewing me," jokes the director.) O'Dowd climbed aboard next. "I got a call September or October, and was asked if I'd be interested," he recalls. "Then I didn't hear anything about it for months. I figured something came up and it had been fallen through. Then I heard it was happening and I signed up that day." Franco is glad that Shapiro is involved for reasons that go beyond her proven talent. "It was so clear after the first table read that it's such a man-heavy play," he says. "Really, there's only one female part. It's nice to have her very strong female energy conducting everything, giving it something new."

Franco's instincts were sound, for, just as he was excited about what Shapiro's less testosterone-oriented viewpoint might bring to the play, Shapiro is pointedly interesting in exploring "the maleness of the story." She explains, "I'm fascinated by how the promise of the American Dream plays itself out in, and on, the men in my life... And I'm particularly occupied by their obsession with this idea of usefulness and worthiness-how this idea of usefulness and worthiness-how they determine their own value and by what measure-because I think there is a kind of cruelty they perpetrate on themselves in this conversation that is heartbreaking to me. Hopefully I'll bring an outsider's compassion, but other than that, I'm not sure it really matters that I'm a woman, per se. I think it mostly matters that I'm fascinated."

Though this is the first Broadway staging of the play in four decades, Shapiro doesn't plan to reinvent the script via some grand directorial concept.

"In my work with Tracy and [playwright] Bruce [Norris], the inhabitants of those worlds use language—and a lot of it—to manage their situations," she says. "This is not that kind of world—this is practical, pragmatic, and, in some ways, more natural environment and so the rules are different."

Despite his reputation as an artistic risktaker, Franco is just fine with that straight-ahead approach. "One thing very clearly leads into the other in a way that everything feels inevitable. As an actor, that's great. I can let the material work on me rather that try [to] manufacture something to make the material work.

"I'm not one who subscribes to the idea of, 'just say the words and it will all happen," he says before laughing and adding, "but in some ways it kind of feels like that!"

Ρ

11

Playbill for A Raisin in the Sun with insert essay 'Sweet Lorraine' Transcribed and Reviewed by Digital Volunteers Extracted Apr-16-2024 01:10:10



## **Smithsonian Institution**

National Museum of African American History and Culture

The mission of the Smithsonian is the increase and diffusion of knowledge - shaping the future by preserving our heritage, discovering new knowledge, and sharing our resources with the world. Founded in 1846, the Smithsonian is the world's largest museum and research complex, consisting of 19 museums and galleries, the National Zoological Park, and nine research facilities.Become an active part of our mission through the Transcription Center. Together, we are discovering secrets hidden deep inside our collections that illuminate our history and our world.

Join us! The Transcription Center: https://transcription.si.edu On Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/SmithsonianTranscriptionCenter On Twitter: @TranscribeSI

Connect with the Smithsonian Smithsonian Institution: www.si.edu On Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/Smithsonian On Twitter: @smithsonian