

the village

VOICE

May 14-20, 2003

We're five minutes into the future, or maybe a lifetime. The calendar seems indeterminate here. Poet Tracie Morris and choreographer David Thomson walk slowly heel to toe, as if following a white line down a road they can't see. Morris begins reciting from the script she calls a poem collection: "When the buildings split, the big ones, lots of things went with them. Like: luck." ■ *Afrofuturistic* had to start with 9-11, "an event that was cleaving," Morris explains later. "It felt like the axis tilted in a way. Because now the world is off." That isn't sci-fi. ■ And her piece is no star trek. It's about the future inherent in the present, the potential utopias and dystopias—mostly the latter. Morris plays Sirena, a black woman who finds that every time she goes out, the world is different, and every time she comes back, so is home. Her activities include attending an environmentalist meeting, encountering a lynching tree, and working as a student on behalf of the wealthy. In Sirena's world, affirmative action is dead and black people go to college indirectly by accessing classes online and taking tests for rich white people.

poet tracie morris looks ahead to the past



words, revealing their physicality and their internal music. Here, to cop a phrase from Dr. Dre, Morris creeps to the mic like a linguist. In Snoop Doggy Dogg, for example, she sees contrast—"the hyper-Southern rural vocal intonation rubbed right up against the hyper-technologically-driven urban intonation. Then Busta Rhymes just wears me out. With the rapidity, the Caribbean intonations, but also the urban African American inflections, he just has a lot of layering going on. Rakim was a huge influence. Huge. Because he introduced internal rhyme into popular culture and not just in a regulated pattern, but in a seemingly improvised pattern."

Morris began riffing on words or syllables. It's the classic avant-garde project, really: testing the limits of language. So "things that were hard to talk about, too dramatic, tragic or striking" to work in two dimensions (the page) became sound poems. Several of them ended up at the 2002 Whitney Biennial.

» "There are contexts in which poetry is not meant to be transparent," says Morris. "You have to read in a different way, think about the resonance of the words. It's not restricted by adherence to syntax and grammar. It can break away from those notions because there's something more fundamental about language that it can get to."

Afrofuturism is a case in point. Much of the language seems coded, opaque. For example, the passage above about how the "buildings split" continues with: "How quaint, anybody outta Philly said, looking at the 12A's on the push-button dash. Cute. Like the lions on libraries. An effect."

If the meaning's a bit slippery, well, Morris has made her case for embracing the difficulties. But not to worry. In *Afrofuturistic*, poetry

is just part of a multimedia context, so there are other clues: video, a live band, Thomson's choreography (he plays the only other character, a muse/trickster), and direction by Laurie Carlos.

Morris was delighted to find that Carlos was not expecting her to explain the poetry. Carlos got it. Her own pieces are similarly abstract. She, too, braids ambiguity, mutability, and possibility into her texts, as if mere facts can't evoke the proper spirits.

"We've done a lot of excavating about what the work really is," says Carlos. Not that it's saying something other than what Morris intended. According to Carlos, "It's saying more. There are more connections to what is historical, and it's in a historical context which has to do with ancient memory, and that ancient memory does not go away as we move into the future. It becomes even more pronounced."

There were other things: "That technology exists in the context of historical memory and historical behavior. That the minstrel show has not abated." Carlos mentions current films by Queen Latifah, Chris Rock, Eddie Murphy, each one "a coon show."

"This is never going to end because we have been inoculated with this mythology," Carlos continues. "My grandson will be trying to figure out how this mask fits him, and he will always be stamped with it. That is not going to change. So that's the excavation for me in this particular journey. And I think a lot of people are going to be shocked at how much of that exists on the stage as we talk about *Afrofuturistic*." ■

Afrofuturistic runs through May 24 at the Kitchen, 512 West 19th Street, 212-255-5793.

afrofuturistic

ON EDGE • BY C. CARR

photo by robin holland

MORRIS (CENTER) WITH VAL-INC. AND DAVID THOMSON OF AFROFUTURISTIC: "PALMPILOTS ARE NOT MAKING ME FREE."

Same old "war of the worlds." That's the *Afrofuturistic* theme.

Racial and sexual power dynamics have not changed for 500 years, Morris says, and she doesn't expect a change for 500 more. We'll land on Mars, racism and sexism intact. "Sometimes I feel that technology is a way to distract us from those power dynamics," she adds. "So it mitigates activism. I'm not a pessimist, I think there's always the possibility that we're in negotiation, that we're in flux. But PalmPilots are not making me free."

» Morris has been a poetry slam champion, and as a rule, you don't win that crown if you aren't some kind of performer. Still, reading, jamming, and all the attitude in the world don't make you an actor, and Morris admits to resisting the very idea. Acting was a leap, but then she's always made leaps.

"I didn't fall out of the black boho skies," she asserts. "I'm from the housing projects in East New York." Once she entered a white high school, she also realized that she'd been poorly educated in East New York. "I knew that I was not intellectually inferior to these

kids, but they just had access to information I was not allowed to have. And I think it was deliberate. I think it was political."

Anger and resentment over this led to activism, which in turn led to the Black Rock Coalition. She wrote speeches, or as she puts it, "My job was to complain." In 1985, she volunteered to read at a BRC event after learning they had no women in the lineup. Once some other women signed up, she tried to drop out, but the organizers kept her name on the list. She remembers dragging herself to CB's Gallery in a panic to be part of this, and "it was like going to the gallows."

When her work was well received, however, she decided to try the open mic at the Nuyorican Poets Café—and then the slams. In 1993, she won both the Nuyorican Grand Slam and the National Haiku Slam.

Her work of that period was rhyming, narrative, colloquial—in other words heavily influenced by hip-hop. There's an aesthetic to hip-hop that's not appreciated, she says. She began to experiment with "ideas that I thought were the underpinnings of the form." Hip-hop was the jackhammer that opened