

The Tibetan Book of the Dead

A review by Nkenge Zola

A spotlight opens and closes on a figure, a man on a crucifix. He is there one second, on a cross, and then he's gone. Is it blasphemy? Has Ron Allen dared to misrepresent



Ron Allen

Christ? Before there is time to organize all these questions, something happens. Time seems to reverse and a woman materializes out of the dark. She is soon joined by a man with no face and then others, each

holding a knife.

When he is seen again, the man from the crucifix has staggered to a bier above his killing floor. He lies there, about to discover the state between death and rebirth.

As a play, *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* began a year ago as an assignment given to Allen by his guiding teacher in Buddhism, Parang

Gerl Larkin. Every initiate at Still Point Buddhist Temple in Unitarian-Universalist Church on Cass is given something to do for their new community. It may be to sew a robe for each member or maintain a part of the temple library. It might also be to prepare tea for visitors after the Sunday dharma talk. Everyone has a different task. Ron's was to adapt Robert Thurman's translation of *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*.

The contemporary hospice movement in the United States had inspired Thurman's translation, which is sometimes read to dying loved ones because it gives structure and characterization to those on their way to the next destination.

Working through the text, filtering the content through the sieve of his subconscious, Allen exacts of himself a platoon of images and language that cycle on stage through the mouths and bodies of characters such as Lord Yama and The Deceased. Another character, Mind, appears through a series of monitors positioned above the stage, which reveal big teeth in gums and tight headshots of a talking face in blue.

At one point, the song, "Heaven is in the womb of the Black woman" can be heard.

For *The Book*, the ensemble of nine includes Doug Bauer, Sandra Hines, Elana Elyce and Amy Arena, all veterans of Allen's plays.

Curiously, theatre folks agree to designate work written or produced by Ron Milner, as well as theaters like the African Renaissance, Plowshares, Urban Spirit, Dorothy Robinson Playhouse and, yes, Detroit Repertory as "Black." Somehow, those who ought to know better have forced Brother Allen's work into the valley and the land of "not Black." No, Ron is not concerned with the logic of step-by-step walking. Don't ask, "Well what is the story?" His goal is to eject audiences into a realm in which thinking ceases. The experience of his plays is, ideally, that: An experience, kind of like a Be In from decades past.

"It is unrelenting," Allen admits. Could this be the reason he has been omitted? If that is so, it's like saying Black folks are incapable of comprehending anything other than a dull voice intoning, "1 + 2 = 3." Scary.

As in any good Black work, there is improvisation, talk play, style and vision. Since his play, *Last Church of the 21st Century*, Allen's plays have bandied sacks of crucified women and men, synthetic audio and visuals, fake sex and insistence upon A Leader. The goal is to manufacture enlightenment. For Allen, notions of story and narrative are but flakes falling from the philo-dough of a Mediterranean sweet.

The night I was there, some laughed and guffawed their way through the play.

After the play I recognized the throb of deep silent weep.

About *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, I say, get it before it's gone.

The Tibetan Book of the Dead: The Great Play of Natural Liberation from the Understanding in the Between.

Written and adapted by Ron Allen
Zeitgeist gallery and performance space,
2661 Michigan Avenue,
313. 965.9192.

Fri. and Sat. thru June 21* at 8 p.m. and
Sun. June 15 at 4 p.m.

\$15 - reservations held until 15 minutes
before the show.

Cast

- The Deceased - Nelson Jones
- Lord Yama - Elana Elyce
- Phenomena - Amy Arena
- Mind - Doug Bauer
- The Teacher - Thomas DeShazor
- The Oracle - Sandra Hines
- The Shaman - Walonda Lewis
- The Healer - Michael McGettigan
- The Arahāt - Kristen Wagner
- An Angel - Sandra Hines
- A Woman - Walonda Lewis
- A Man - Michael McGettigan



Elana Elyce as "Lord Yama."

Based on the translation of the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* by Robert Thurman

Produced by Troy Richard

Directed by John Jakary

Videography by Jason Flowers

Original Sound by VsonEar

Music by Faruq Z. Bey and the

Northwoods Improvisers

Costumes by Heather White and Emily

Rose Merrell

Masks by Diana Alva, Jim Brown, James

Puntigam, and Heather White

Lighting by John Jakary

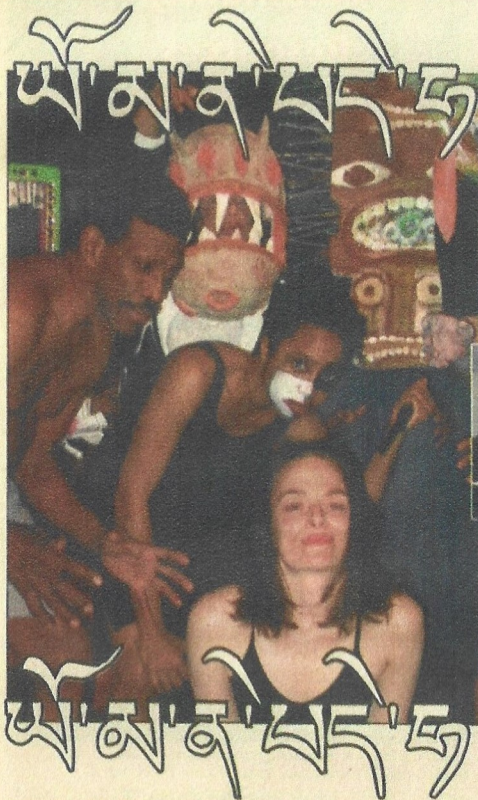
Set Design and Construction

by Troy Richard

Original Artwork by DMC

Promotional Material Designed

by Tim Storm



Unmasked cast members from left: Nelson Jones, "The Deceased", Walonda Lewis, "The Shaman," and Amy Arena, who is "Phenomena." *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* by Ron Allen runs through June 21st at Zeitgeist.