



WALTER BORDEN'S

THE LAST EPISTLE OF TIGHTROPE TIME

DIRECTED BY PETER HINTON-DAVIS

A Tarragon Theatre/ NAC presentation of
the NAC/Neptune Theatre production.



NATIONAL ARTS CENTRE
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TARRAGON THEATRE

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Mainspace

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Please Note: titles highlighted in red may be of particular interest to educators.

About the Playwright

For the past half century, Walter Borden has been an acclaimed actor, playwright, poet and teacher. Along the way, he has performed on stages across Canada. Importantly, Walter says the foundation for his career was laid in his hometown of New Glasgow. That's because it was when he was growing up in Pictou County that he began to grasp the potential he possessed. "By the time that I left New Glasgow in 1960, everything that I had been taught combined to make me ready to go and do whatever I want to do. I've lived by the maxim be a sower of seeds, a witness and a messenger."



Walter graduated from Acadia University and the Nova Scotia Teachers' College, then went to New York to study acting at the highest possible level. He came back to Nova Scotia, and the rest of Canada, as a fully developed performer and creator. In the late 1960s, he helped establish Kwaacha House - an interracial teen-oriented, drop-in and social education centre that inspired young Nova Scotians to seek full equality of citizenship and full equality of opportunity for African Nova Scotians. Walter was a mentor to many young Blacks at this time.

On the stage, Borden joined Halifax's Neptune Theatre Company in 1972, and performed with them and other theatrical troupes many times since. He has also had numerous roles in films and on television. In each role, Walter Borden captivates audiences. One particularly noteworthy work was the play he wrote and performed entitled *Tightrope Time: Ain't Nuthin' More Than Some Itty Bitty Madness Between Twilight And Dawn*. It was an autobiographical examination of the complex world of a central character who is Black and gay, who is raised in small town Nova Scotia but is living in a city facing challenges like racism, impoverishment and homophobia.

For his long and distinguished career in the arts, Walter Borden has received many awards and honours – including the Queen Elizabeth II Golden and Diamond Jubilee Medals, the African Nova Scotian Music Association's Music Heritage Award and the Portia White Prize and been made a member of the Order of Canada.

Playwright's Note

On August 4, 1974, I sat in a wicker chair in the sunroom at 2764 Windsor Street, Halifax, Nova Scotia, fully committed to writing my memoirs, if you please. Unfortunately, it would take a few more years of living and learning before I gained the insight and the humility to compose and understand the lines that wove themselves into the philosophical fabric of what one day was to become *The Last Epistle of Tightrope Time*:

pretentiousness will compel you,
in the springtime of your twenties,
to think your life an epic for
a BOOK

My premature indulgence culminated with an eight-line poem and the firm conclusion that I really had nothing else to say. So that took care of the memoirs. That poem exists still in the completed work of *The Last Epistle of Tightrope Time* and therefore truly can be considered its genesis.

The next nine years of writing allowed me to realize two things: (1) the narrative poem was my natural mode of expression; and (2) I preferred to think in operatic terms and therefore fashioned arias and recitatives as opposed to monologues and soliloquies.

In 1983, after reading all that I had written up to that point, I could hear several distinct voices riffing on a theme, as it were, and I wove selected material into the first iteration of *The Last Epistle of Tightrope Time*, a six-character solo performance piece called *Can't Stop Now, Saints Have Trod*, produced and staged by Barry Dunn at the Sir James Dunn Theatre in Halifax.

In 1984, a nine-character second iteration called *Tightrope Time Ain't Nuthin' More Than Some Itty Bitty Madness Between Twilight and Dawn* was produced by the Nova Scotia Drama League, under the auspices of executive director Eva Moore, and staged at the National Multicultural Theatre Festival in St. John's, Newfoundland.

A third, twelve-character iteration with the same name was produced by Tom Regan's UpStart Theatre Company at Cunard Street Theatre in Halifax in 1986. The following year, this same production, co-sponsored by the Nova Scotia Drama League and the Acadia University Theatre Department, Wolfville, Nova Scotia, and directed by Frederick Edell, represented Canada at the International Amateur Theatre Association Festival in Utrecht, the Netherlands. It was subsequently staged at de Engelenbak Theatre, Amsterdam, and then at Centaur Theatre, Montreal, with Black Theatre Workshop as producer. Following this, in 2000, it appeared in print in Volume 1 of the anthology *Testifyin': Contemporary African Canadian Drama*, edited by Djanet Sears and published by Playwrights Canada Press.

Then, in 2004, Black Theatre Workshop once again presented this iteration at MAI/Montréal, arts interculturels, directed by ahdri zhina mandiola and performed by Chimwemwe Miller. To date, that is the only time Tightrope Time has been performed by an actor other than the playwright. This iteration was published in 2005, again by Playwrights Canada Press, as Tightrope Time: Ain't Nuthin' More Than Itty Bitty Madness Between Twilight & Dawn. Both previous publications are now out of print.

A fourth iteration, facilitated by ahdri zhina mandiola and b current Performing Arts company, evolved in 2010. Some characters disappeared, some morphed into the narrative of other characters, and a new one, Black Man Talking, emerged. Subsequently, in 2012, it was workshopped and presented by Tarragon Theatre with direction by Andrew Moodie, music composed and performed by Adrien Piper-Clarke, and stage management by Jamie Robinson.

In 2016, this fourth iteration, now titled The Epistle of Tightrope Time, was produced by San Family Productions Inc. under the direction of Juanita Peters at The Bus Stop Theatre in Halifax, Nova Scotia. The significance of this presentation was the realization that over a span of forty-two years (1974 to 2016), the Host character (the Young Man) had naturally transitioned into Black Man Talking (the Griot) and therefore from that point on had to exist as one of the voices of that character.

In traditional African culture, the Griot is the Storyteller, the Keeper of the Record of the village, of the tribe. From a very early age, the Griot's life is dedicated to committing to memory the history and lineage of the people from antiquity to the present, as passed down orally from the current Griot to the child who has been chosen to succeed them. Black Man Talking's journey is one of initiation into that noble calling.

In January of 2022, the fifth and final iteration of the play began rehearsal at the National Arts Centre, Ottawa. Produced by NAC English Theatre and curated by Black Theatre Workshop, it was helmed by Peter Hinton-Davis (director) with Andy Moro (set, costume, lighting, and video designer), Adrienne Danrich-O'Neill (sound designer), Wayne Hawthorne (assistant sound designer), Melissa Rood (stage manager), and Alison Crosby (assistant stage manager). We had made it to the cue-to-cue rehearsal when, because of the trucker protest that crippled the city, production had to be terminated.

The final preparations of the play during its NAC phase were vastly illuminating for me in so many ways, but three revelations were of profound importance. The first was knowing that the completed work should be called *The Last Epistle of Tightrope Time*. I had come to see it as the final testament in an old parchment document that had been compiled by this person named Black Man Talking as a journal of his evolution.

The second was that Carnival Crossroads, a location simply referenced in passing in previous iterations, had been reinterpreted as the critical focal conversion point of the potential life paths we choose to follow, and as such, it is the core around which the play orbits. For that reason, an illustrated map of Carnival Crossroads, along with a brief description of the prevailing conditions that will be encountered on each path, precedes the text of the play and serves to illuminate the heightened function of that locale.

The third, and quite probably most important revelation was the evolution of the Estelusti Spirit, a barely referenced entity in all previous iterations, to the firmly established and essential position of conduit between the Sphinx and Black Man Talking, the Griot. Just as the presence of the Sphinx pays homage to the African ancestry of the playwright, the presence of the Estelusti Spirit pays homage to his Indigenous ancestry. Historically, the name Estelusti was given to the progeny of African slaves and people of the Native American Seminole Nation, hence Seminole Estelusti. When they were forced to migrate from the American South, primarily to Oklahoma, along with the progeny of similar unions between enslaved Africans and people of Cherokee, Chickasaw, Choctaw, and Muscogee (Creek) Nations, the combined group became known as the Black Indians of Oklahoma and was often collectively referred to as the Estelusti. Understandably, and certainly not unexpectedly, unions had probably taken place among the various groups, so the umbrella nomenclature no doubt arose from that circumstance.

In the mid-1700s, a contingent of these people made their way to Nova Scotia, by way of Philadelphia, and eventually settled in Guysborough County. Blacks from the American South had already made their way north and settled in that same area. They had formed unions with people of the Indigenous Mi'kmaq Nation who had been there for millennia. Likewise, the new arrivals eventually formed unions with Blacks and Black Mi'kmaq, and the union between them and the latter group produced the progeny from which the playwright is descended. Thus his homage to his Estelusti Spirit.

Prior to the derailment of the NAC production by the "Freedom Convoy" protest, Neptune Theatre in Halifax had already scheduled it as the inaugural play of its sixtieth season, and so, with feverish replanning and reconfiguring on the part of both parties (the NAC and Neptune), *The Last Epistle of Tightrope Time* premiered at that venue on September 16, 2022, as "a Neptune Theatre presentation of the NAC English Theatre production."

This work was a continuous evolution over a period of forty-eight years during which time no other literary creation was undertaken by the playwright; my living had to fashion the narrative that was the essence of the play—an illumination of the resiliency of the human spirit.

Creative Team

Peter Hinton-Davis - Director

Andy Moro - Set, Costume, Video,
and Lighting Design

Adrienne Danrich - Sound Designer & Composer

Wayne Hawthorne - Associate Sound Designer

Lyon Smith - Sound Coordinator

Fiona Jones - Stage Manager

Alison Crosby - Assistant Stage Manager

 Click here



BONUS!

Walter Borden: Tightrope Time

Walter Borden performs excerpts from his play
Tightrope Time in 1986 on CBC Nova Scotia.

Director's Note

The Last Epistle of Tightrope Time, is Walter's letter to the world. But rather than a memoir (which looks backward) his epistle also looks forward, to illuminate one's calling in life.

Over the past four years, Walter and I have worked rigorously and tenderly to refine and sculpt the text for performance. Taking over 40 years of material and crafting it into a new version for 2023 was and is always the challenge. Walter wants a text, that not only retains aspects of earlier versions but includes new writing and new perspectives. To transform hundreds of pages of material to a fulsome but lean text for a ninety-minute performance was no easy task. As Walter says, "It has been like taking a chisel and hammer to a large block of marble to reveal the sculpture already within."

I am honoured to be invited by Walter to direct this production. I am forever grateful for the chance to learn from his epistle and to walk with him inside of it. I did so in partnership with the formidable designers Andy Moro, Adrienne Danrich O'Neill and Wayne Hawthorn; I have rarely felt such connection amongst peers, co-conspirators and guides. And lastly, no play would ever be made without the care and diligent holding of our stage managers, Melissa Rood, Martine Beland, Fiona Jones and the incomparable Alison Crosby, it's hard to imagine that any play could more satisfyingly made.

About the Play

Synopsis

From legendary Canadian artist Walter Borden, *The Last Epistle of Tightrope Time* is a deeply personal reflection on Walter's journey of life. An invigorating autobiographical performance Walter revisits the show, initially written and performed in 1986 as *Tightrope Time Ain't Nuthin' More Than Some Itty Bitty Madness Between Your Twilight & Your Dawn*. Through a solo performance featuring 10 characters, Walter explores homosexuality from a Black perspective and offers an experience of the resiliency of the human spirit.

Characters

*I take my shadow by the hand,
and side by side we walk a midnight mile
together -*

moonlighting with a teardrop...

- The Way of the Griot

Black Man Talking: the Griot*

(the Keeper of the Record)

Estelusti Spirit: the Guide**

The Sphinx: the Teacher

and

Shadow Folk of the Village

- Child: the Griot at his earliest age
- Young Man: the Griot as an adolescent
- Mother: a protector
- The Pastor: a proselytizer
- The Minister of Defense: a militant
- Ethiopia: a drag queen
- Adie Day: a lady of the night
- Chuck: a hustler

Characters

Please Note: Information in this section is paraphrased from the playwright's note.

*In traditional African culture, the Griot is the Storyteller the Keeper of the Record of the village/tribe. From a very early age, the Griot's life is dedicated to committing to memory the history and lineage of the people, from antiquity to the present, as passed down orally from the current Griot to the child who has been chosen to succeed them.



How Griots Tell Legendary Epics through Stories and Songs in West Africa

In the western Sahel, legendary tales are shared and passed down through different forms of expression, but especially spoken word.

Characters

** The Estelusti Spirit pays homage to Walter's Indigenous ancestry. Historically, the name Estelusti was given to the progeny of African enslaved people and people of the Native American Seminole Nation, Seminole Estelusti. When they were forced to migrate from the American South, primarily Oklahoma, along with the progeny of similar various unions between African enslaved people and people of Cherokee, Chickasaw, and Muscogee (Creek) Nations, the group became known as the Black Indians of Oklahoma and was often collectively referred to as the Estelusti.

In the mid 1700s, a contingent of Estelusti made their way to Nova Scotia, and eventually settled in Guysborough County. Blacks from the American South had already made their way north and settled in that same area. They formed unions with people of the Indigenous Mi'kmaq Nation who had been there for millennia. Likewise, the new arrivals eventually formed unions with Blacks and Black Mi'kmaq and the union between them and the latter group produced the progeny from which the playwright is descended. Thus his homage to his Estelusti Spirit.

Black, Native American and Fighting for Recognition in Indian Country

Enslaved people were also driven west along the Trail of Tears. After a historic Supreme Court ruling, their descendants are fighting to be counted as tribal members.



Interviews with Walter Borden

1



The Last Epistle of Tightrope Time: The Enduring Wisdom of Walter Borden

CBC's IDEAS celebrates the delightful wisdom of Walter Borden and a revised version of his one-man play.



Click here to read an excerpts from this conversation between Walter Borden and IDEAS producer Mary Lynk.



2

Spotlight: Walter Borden

Walter Borden on his life, his identity and his legacy.



3



Walter Borden's One-man Play Returns to Halifax Stage 48 Years After its Creation

Walter Borden speaks with CBC Radio's Information Morning Halifax host Portia Clark.

Black Nova Scotian History



1

Africville Forever

A 5-part series exploring the history and continuing activism surrounding this once thriving safe haven for Black Canadians.

2

Black Migration In Nova Scotia

African Nova Scotian history, timeline, and highlights compiled by the Black Cultural Centre for Nova Scotia.



3

Canada's Forgotten Pioneers

How African Nova Scotians have contributed to the history of Canada.



Black Queer Canadian History

1

QTBIPOC History One-pager

A timeline spanning 1980-2016, including terms and definitions.

2

Canadian Queer History

An interactive timeline spanning 1969-2022.

3

7 Queer Black Trailblazers You Should Know

Compiled by the Canadian Pride Historical Society.

4

Canada's Queer Rights Movement Exists Because of Black People

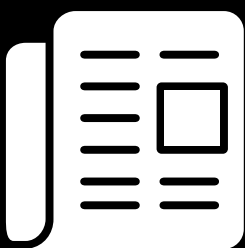
An often ignored history.



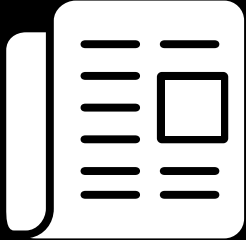
5

In a Time of Protest, Black LGBTQ Voices Rise

Activists say a shift in conversation is sending Pride back to its roots of protest.



Biblical Allusions



1

BABYLON: Myth and Truth

Urban activist and historian Dylan Reid discusses the formation of the prototype of the “Big Bad City”.

2

Joshua Fit The Battle of Jericho

A traditional spiritual that aligns the Biblical story with the struggle for Black liberation, as sung by Mahalia Jackson.



3

The Junction

An exploration of how Black Canadian Christians authentically engage their faith in times of global protest for Black Lives.



Conversation Starters

How did the experiential (vs. narrative) nature of the show affect your understanding of the characters and their experiences?

This show exists in an ethereal reality. What do you think this implies about the fluidity of identity over time?

What did you learn about personal narrative?

What did you learn about Canadian history?

What do you think the crayons symbolize?

2SLGBTQ Support and Resources

- The 519
- Sherbourne Health
 - SOY (supporting 2SLGBTQ youth)
 - Rainbow Health Ontario
- 2SLGBTQ Youth Line (peer support)
- Trans Lifeline
- Egale
- 2-Spirited People of the 1st Nations
- Umbrella Mental Health Network