

City University of New York (CUNY)

## CUNY Academic Works

---

Publications and Research

City College of New York

---

2011

### Ellen

Edgar Nkosi White

[How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!](#)

More information about this work at: [https://academicworks.cuny.edu/cc\\_pubs/4](https://academicworks.cuny.edu/cc_pubs/4)

Discover additional works at: <https://academicworks.cuny.edu>

---

This work is made publicly available by the City University of New York (CUNY).  
Contact: [AcademicWorks@cuny.edu](mailto:AcademicWorks@cuny.edu)

## ELLEN STEWART (CAFÉ LA MAMA)

By Edgar Nkosi White

There were three people who were pivotal to my career in theatre. The first was the black poet and writer, Langston Hughes, who taught me to believe in my work and therefore my self. The second was Martin Sheen the actor of *The West Wing* fame. It was he who first dared me to write a play when I was aged nineteen. He then presented that play, *The Mummers Play*, to Joe Papp at the Public Theatre where it was eventually performed successfully. The third and most special was Ellen Stewart of Café La Mama. It was she who produced my most important play, *Lament for Rastafari*, without even reading it. This is a practice she was famous for. What she said to me was:

“Edgar, I don’t care about words, I care about vision.”

Now how do you tell this to a young playwright who is obviously obsessed with language that his words don’t matter? Apparently, she had amazing insight because she has had a string of successes and has numbered everyone from Sam Shepherd to Albee among her followers.

She first asked me how I came to write the play and I found myself telling her about a sunrise in the Malvern Hills of Jamaica. How I had this incredible vision of all the dead of the Caribbean rising from the soil and crying out. I saw that history wasn’t static but was alive and constant and transforming. It was there in the Blue Mountains and in the prisons like General Penitentiary where the prisoners were all dark and the guards long and light of skin just like the colonial society they help protect. I told her of what I saw in the journey of a single family from the Caribbean to England and then America , the same triangular voyage of the Middle Passage only in a modern guise.

I was able to speak to Ellen from my heart and it reached her somehow and she agreed to do my play. I never knew where Ellen was born and where she came from. Perhaps from the sea like the Goddess Ochun. It didn’t matter because she was salt and light and just what I needed at the time.

Ellen was important not only because of that production and the encouragement but because of her uncanny ability to ask questions which set you on fire. For example:

“What if your audience doesn’t speak English?”

That simple question set a spark. Very simply I had never conceived of an audience who was not English speaking for a very obvious reason. I, like so many others in America, considered anyone who was non-English speaking to be irrelevant. You see, racism is hidden in the very nature of language itself.

After Ellen I became aware that the entire world was my audience. My responsibility as a writer is to communicate. My tools should therefore be not only words but gesture and music and above all rhythm. Any writer who dismisses the other arts as unimportant to the craft of writing is only half alive and will soon find them self irrelevant. The responsibility is not necessarily to know everything but to at least experience everything, and more important, make their audience experience it. This takes years and cannot be taught in school plantations (called universities and colleges). This can only be lived.

Art is the only place where all the mistakes of your life can be put right and made worthwhile and even beautiful. Ellen Stewart taught me that and that’s why she was known as La Mama (the mother).

The major thing which Ellen did was lead by example. She lived her art. She began as a seamstress and arrived at a point where she had enough confidence in herself and her “eyes” to begin her own theatre company. In other words, she moved from plantation to field and asked no one’s permission. When I tried to get her to come and see my work say at the Public Theatre, she informed me that she didn’t go to other people’s theatres, “That’s why I have my own.” Then she would smile with that innocent but mocking smile of hers. I soon learned from her and began my own theatre company, The Yardbird Players. Our first production was **The Ode to Charlie Parker** and we opened at Studio Rivbea which was located on Bond Street on the Lower East Side. Sam Rivers did the music.

Now there is no finer way to learn the exciting world of theatre than to try to start your own. Suddenly, all the things which we take for granted become immensely important. Little things like rent, heat and food result in audience (or the lack thereof). It’s all well and good to have a theatre space but if you can’t fill it and keep it filled, you will soon lose it. The old Marxist question keeps popping up:

“Who is going to take out the garbage?”

The answer is always the same eventually: You do. When you own a theatre you do everything yourself and all romance quickly leaves. Theatres are cold in winter and hot in summer. Both extremes are costly. Providing heat and air conditioning will soon have you poor rather than rich. The only consolation is the fact that you get a rush every time you see your name on the billboard (which of course you'll pay for).

All this just makes you all the more amazed when you realize that Ellen was able to keep her theatre going for over fifty years through all kinds of economy. The word *economy* itself comes from the Greek, meaning the management of the house. (They call it the sad science). Ellen knew about houses. She made certain that no one who worked for her ever starved. She fed you both literally and spiritually.

Now Ellen felt very keenly the fact that she was not celebrated in the black community. But the Lower East Side is not Harlem . It exists for fringe-dwellers like my self. She made herself available but unlike say Barbara Ann Teer (who died over two years before Ellen), she wasn't willing to base her theatre in Harlem .

Whatever is said I know I was glad to have her door open to me and especially in times of uncertainty (you can substitute the word starvation here). I could always visit and get some nurturing and a check which I could cash around the corner at the check cashing center across from the Police station (well known to every true member of La Mama). Her checks were always cashed without question because she had a special relationship and her signature was unequivocal.

When I returned from Britain with a new play about the Scottsboro Boys (a major case in the history of Civil Rights which involved 9 black youths wrongfully accused of the rape of two white girls and the trials and retrials lasted over ten years in Alabama ) I had no question where I wanted it performed: La Mama. Who else would have even looked at it, a play which was done with a mixture of the Theatre of the Absurd together with historical accuracy, and presented as a Blues Opera? I certainly couldn't take it to say Lincoln Center . Even the Public Theatre now that Joe Papp had gone on to produce in heaven was being run by committees. Even though four of my

plays had been performed there it was the second least likely place to take it. Especially, since you must never allow the audience the luxury of guilt. Ellen had taught me that.

So La Mama was the only place. And she saved me again. The play was called ***Ghost Live from Galilee*** and the music was done by Genji Ito and was his most successful production, which was good since he too died shortly after from cancer. You never know when you do a play how far it will travel. In the case of ***Ghost***, the script made it all the way to India where a young director named Neilesh Bose asked to do it. I'd never even known that anyone in India had even heard of the case but I was wrong. The play touched him.

It was my return to New York and therefore America . The nice thing about New York is that no one gives a damn what you've done before. It doesn't matter how many books you've published or what you've done in England or on Mars. Two years can be lethal, never mind ten. Ten years is enough for a whole new generation. Long enough for youth not to even remember who Bob Marley was. In theatre, ten years can be especially long. Long enough for August Wilson to get three Pulitzers.

God is very clever when he's ready and he saw to it that I missed the AIDS epidemic. For some strange reason known to God only, London was spared AIDS. If you know why please tell me. There was certainly the same practice going on there as New York and yet there was no plague. I was also able to overcome addiction there. I think the only addiction I never had in my life was gambling (although art is the greatest gamble in the world. You gamble that you'll get rich before you become poor).

As for Ellen, she attended so many funerals while I was away that she vowed to never attend another funeral except her own. She kept that vow for twenty years. If she had broken it people would have felt slighted. She couldn't go to one and not another. I missed all the madness and so returning was like surfacing from the depths of the sea. If people don't see you for ten years, they assume you've died although they'd heard rumors of productions in London and something about The Royal Court but it was too distant to be real. Things in America are only real if televised.

But I don't believe television and because I can't believe anything which I don't see with my eyes, I went on a trip to Iraq on the eve of the war and saw

the bombed hospitals and the babies who were so thin in their cradles that they looked like rhesus monkeys. Because of the ban the US had placed on medicine, these children couldn't even be treated. I realized when I saw the resolve of the Iraqis that we could never win there. There is a saying there: "A wet man doesn't fear the rain." I wrote about that experience and created a theatre piece, *The Birds of Baghdad*. Again, no one else than La Mama would even think of doing it. Harlem was not interested because it wasn't about either winning the Lottery or cross dressing.

When 9/11 happened it divided the world between those who were in New York at the time of the attack and those who were not. The peculiar thing is that those who were absent, for whatever reason, felt guilty (like Holocaust survivors). On the other hand, those of us who were here suffered nightmares which wouldn't let us sleep for a year afterword. Now the theatre is not a church. People tend to go to church after a crisis in the belief that a prayer can't hurt (just in case God really does exist) whereas, the theatres went empty because people were saving their money for flight. Maybe to someplace small sunny and neutral like say Costa Rica , people were genuinely frightened since no one had ever come to New York and surprise us. This is what we do in foreign places. They never come here. And the targets they chose and the precision of their attack made sleep impossible. The only antidote was revenge and so the theatre moved out into the streets. Even Hollywood was enlisted in the relentless campaign of war. It didn't matter with who. Just so we bombed someone into submission. The theatre was left behind.

What matters here is not what you've done but what you're selling now and can it matter to their lives today. The eternal question: Are you more interesting than a video game? This is very difficult to answer unless you really know who you are, in which case, you answer immediately like Ellen Stewart: "You damn right I am!"

If you want to know what courage is, I'll tell you. It's that thing closest to madness without falling over. Courage is Ellen when she was in the hospital two years ago and when I went in to say a few prayers with her, only to find her there in her hospital room directing her actors (led by Volois Marie, the one black actress who had stayed with her from the beginning of the company) who had all crowded in the room, all from her hospital bed. And the nurses who were so hypnotized by her that they just stood around with an

oxygen mask for her. I still can't believe that scene. She'd quarantined Death and told him He couldn't enter until she'd finished directing her last play.

The last time I saw her she couldn't speak my name. All I could do for her was play my flute. I played **Nature Boy** for her, the Nat King Cole tune she always loved, and it brought tears to her eyes. I didn't need to tell her that I was homeless or sleeping in parks. The choice was mine. I could have stayed with old friends but I didn't want to hear my lines being quoted and repeated to me, not so much for my benefit as for their own need for nostalgia. I could also have gone to New Dramatist where I was a member and slept up in the Seventh Heaven where in-transit writers stay, but I'd done that before and I don't like doing repeats. I'm like Ellen in that regard. She always said:

"Don't tell me what I've done. I already know that. Tell me what you're doing. That's more interesting to me."

They say that Tennessee Williams had one recurring nightmare which would have him waking up in a cold sweat and panic. He dreamt that he was suddenly poor again as in the beginning and the thought so terrified him that he'd have to medicate himself.

I have no such fears because I know with absolute certainty that there is no certainty. And like Ellen said, when you're a real artist, you have to give away yourself over and over in order to find it. That self. I knew that I would never see her again in life and that without her the Lower East Side had no meaning for me. Joe Papp was gone and now Ellen Stewart. And so I left the City and came home to Montserrat and the sea as she would have wanted me to. Forward again.

Edgar Nkosi White  
Library Scholar In Residence, 2010-2011