



(From left) Brian Carter-Green and Wendell Manwareen. (PHOTO: COURTESY OF CHRIS HUXLEY)

The 'Aesthetic Republic': A Review of Derek Walcott's *O Starry, Starry Night* (Caribbean Premiere)

O Starry, Starry Night (Written and directed by Derek Walcott, produced by Adrian Augier, Caribbean Premiere, Samaans Park, St Lucia, August 8)

by Stephanie McKenzie

NOBEL Laureate Derek Walcott brought his latest play to the stage on August 8 at Samaans Park, St Lucia for its Caribbean premiere. The world premiere was in May at the University of Essex where Walcott is professor of poetry. *O Starry, Starry Night* was directed by Walcott, in attendance at the St Lucia opening, and featured Brian Carter-Green, as Vincent van Gogh; Natalie LaPorte, as Lotte; Wendell Manwarren, as Paul Gauguin; David Tarkenter, as The Proprietor; Nigel Scott, as Theo van Gogh; and Michael Prokopiou, as A Zouave. There are plans to bring the play to Trinidad and, possibly, Barbados.

O Starry, Starry Night is a tribute to Vincent van Gogh and, to a lesser extent, Paul Gauguin. The play focuses on their time spent together in Arles, France in 1888 where they lived and painted together.

Walcott's play poses large questions. What do you do when you believe only in the faith that gives rise to great art and when even fellow artists turn their backs on you?

The play begins with a poetic soliloquy. "O starry, starry night, how shall I exalt?" Van

Gogh questions as he enters on stage. The "fruit," he says, that "hang heavily in the branched sky" and "the wild orbs that plummet" inevitably "steer us home towards heaven". With Van Gogh's painting *Church at Auvers* hanging in the background, and the suggestion of another masterpiece, *Starry Night*, superimposed on it, the crux of the play is underscored. Walcott foregrounds what Van Gogh knew: art can only play second fiddle to the actual stars in the sky which, in turn, bow to their creator. Despite human limitations, though, beauty must be praised if one has an artist's soul. However, Walcott shows that Van Gogh's need to praise created more intense struggles for him than for other artists.

Van Gogh was the son of a clergyman and an aspiring preacher himself before he took up painting. He was consumed by faith. But Walcott's play questions what happens to an artist when no one understands the expression of the artist's faith, the relentless attempts to praise the designs of the universe. What happens when expressing beauty is a way to pray and there is no one to worship with? It may be enough to drive one mad, *O Starry, Starry Night* suggests. The play gestures to other potential causes of Van Gogh's madness, like absinthe or turpentine poisoning and syphilis, but these are only detractors.

When Lotte and Gauguin appear, a subplot or secondary theme explores the relationship between locales, success, and fulfilment. Lotte, a composite created out of the many prostitutes and brothels the artists shared, curses Arles, a "backwater." The Proprietor counters her logic when Gauguin

arrives from Paris telling Gauguin he is in a town, not a city, but maintaining Arles is capable of producing "saints" as well as "brothels". The play's set supports this. A selection of paintings, primarily by Van Gogh but also several by Gauguin, dominates the stage, highlighting masterpieces created by those who shared space in Arles.

Van Gogh and Gauguin's relationship rules the play, however. Van Gogh desires an "aesthetic republic" while Gauguin craves a "hedonistic paradise", claiming to have almost found it in Martinique. Gauguin will spend most of his time wrapped up with Lotte, while Van Gogh becomes obsessed with the idea of Gauguin leaving him. Van Gogh's overzealousness becomes a fixation. In real life, Van Gogh had been too overzealous for even the Dutch Reformed Church when he followed his first love and preached to the coal miners in the Borinage, Belgium. He was essentially fired and carried his zeal to canvas. Walcott understandably exposes him as zealous in everything. "Who was with you in Martinique?" he jealously demands of Gauguin. Though critics might sink their articles into a homoerotic subtext, Walcott really depicts Van Gogh as overzealous with the idea he might lose a companion and someone to preach to or pray with in brushstrokes, even though isolation feeds his art and production.

In Act 2, we meet Theo, Van Gogh's brother, who, as Walcott shows, was a stable source of love and finances for Van Gogh. Theo recognises Van Gogh will "make Arles immortal" and determines he does not paint "architecture" but "its faith". However,

no one understands Van Gogh's art. "You're a dealer, Theo," Van Gogh says. "That doesn't mean you understand anything about painting." Painting, as Van Gogh explains to him, is "spiritual procedure."

The secondary theme grows with Lotte now infected by Gauguin's syphilis and determined to escape to Paris. Gauguin spreads the ashes of Ash Wednesday on her forehead and declares her to be his "little savage". Walcott attacks colonial myths about barbarism and civilisation, but his play stays focused on Van Gogh's suffering.

"There are various ways to die," Van Gogh says to Gauguin when he knows Gauguin will leave him, for part of him has died already knowing his republic is passing. Walcott's play concludes not with Van Gogh's death on stage but with abstraction which suggests that Van Gogh's physical death was fuelled by the death of his aesthetic dream. His omnipresent *Church of Auvers* reminds one where the artist shot himself.

O Starry, Starry Night leaves one to meditate on the power of beauty. The set is breathtaking, the actors superb with Brian Carter-Green as Van Gogh shining. The lighting grows bright and darkens with Van Gogh's manic and depressed moods and radiates a message about faith in aesthetics. The talented accordion playing of Julian Harries acts as a poetic refrain interspersed with the mature verse of Walcott, solid as St Lucia's Pitons. Walcott's accompanying sketches, a trademark of the painter/poet, were also part of the night's beauty, exhibited in the reception area. The work would be equally at home on display in such a place as the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam, for Walcott, like Van Gogh, transcends regions.

The one weakness is that Walcott dwells on Van Gogh cutting off his ear which leads to unnecessary melodrama. Van Gogh only ever cut off a portion of his ear, and, though significant, Walcott's play joins intrigues which have consumed too much mythic devotion. But this is only a minor fault.

O Starry, Starry Night is the mature vision of one master paying tribute to another and to aesthetics. Two days prior to this production's opening, another memorable exchange of minds took place at a plenary conversation for the recent ACLALS conference in St Lucia. Walcott spoke with Professor Emeritus of English at the Mona campus of the University of the West Indies, fellow poet and Walcott scholar, Edward Baugh, remarking that "painting has nothing to do with language". However, the two might meet, as they did in *O Starry, Starry Night*, and when masters of such ilk gather, we might recognise, as Van Gogh does in Walcott's play, that "we are insignificant".

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