

The Conductor, a new play by Ishmael Reed

A Review

By Wanda Sabir

Over 150 years later, who would have guessed there would be a need to revive an old transportation system moving human beings from slavery to freedom? In this instance it isn't physical enslavement, rather social attempts to capture and eliminate viewpoints that subvert the dominant discourse.

21st century conductor, Warren Chipp (actor Brian Simmons) is subsidized and Black. Yep, this time the folks on-the-lam are South Asian or Indian. The color is brown. The irony is the person Chipp is helping escape is his ideological enemy—Shashi Parmar (Imran Javaid) in fact, Shashi caused Chipp to lose his job at *The San Francisco Chrysalis*, a local newspaper, he was columnist for.

A staged reading, hosted by Theater for a New City, it feels like a real play. Somehow the actors make the virtual walls disappear as characters pass newspapers to one another cross screens and a character grabs another character and hits her. I have watched the scene twice to figure out how they do it. Warren Chipp is the resident sage and captain of the railroad ferrying South Asians out of the county. No one wants them, not even Canada.

Ishmael Reed's new work, *The Conductor*, as in Underground Railroad, is a spin on a system that worked. Within its historic context—California was supposedly a “free state,” however, not according to maverick newswoman, Delilah Beasley in “[Slavery in California](#).” Not according to Biddy Mason, enslaved woman, later Los Angeles millionaire, who took her owner to court and sued for her freedom and that of her family and friends and won.

Typically Reed-like, *The Conductor* is a hold onto your hats and get out your pens masterpiece—you will want to take notes and look up references.

The work is located within a context highlighting San Francisco Bay Area political themes with national and global impact— We watch the events of the past election with San Francisco District Attorney Chesa Boudin's and the San Francisco School Board's recall, not to mention the racial tension at Lowell High School between Chinese and Black students. Facts are skewed or completely ignored as capital driven ideas are dined on voraciously by the American public who swallow without thought.

Witty and fast paced – there is balance between the sides—far right meets the left in Chipp's living room on TV and in person. Carla Blank's direction is sharp—everyone is on his or her toes. I love the reference to the *San Francisco Bay View* and journalist Melody Wells (Kenya Wilson aka Wanda Sabir) and of course *The San Francisco Chrysalis* and Warren Chipp.

TV news stations feature popular anchor: Hedda “Buttermilk” Duckbill (actor Laura Robards) and Gabriel Noitalde (Emil Guillermo). The two anchors (performed by outstanding actors) parade the other side of the opinion poll.

Though there is much laughter and surprise in Reed’s *Conductor*, the “sorrow songs” provide a sobering chorus as those who know notice how seriously the alt-right take themselves. It is “die,” not “do” or “die”—martyrdom and self-sacrifice, an operative systemic belief that is dangerous to freewill and democracy. No one is safe on the perceived wrong side which switches back and forth depending on who the lynch mob is after.

It is interesting how even as Parmar hides out as he waits to escape, he does not believe his position is wrong despite Chipp’s stream of consciousness tickertape—the guy is always on. Journalism is in his blood, that or African ancestors. If you get lost, Tennessee Reed’s voice as narrator will get you back on track.

When he can stay awake, Parmar stops Chipp several times to ask his host how he knows so much about race and history including South Asian history. Chipp tells him he has a personal tutor (a funny foreshadowing.)

At one point Parmar who clearly feels himself superior to the “conductor,” says that he would not like a Black man as a brother-in-law when talk turns to South Asian’s who pass for Black American. Parmar looks surprised when Chipp tells him “Krishna” in Sanskrit means “black” or “dark blue” or the “all attractive.”

He can’t pass for a Black person, but his sister, Kala Parmar (Monisha Shiva, actor) can and does. As if she hears her name called, Kala shows up too at Chipp’s apartment—it is a regular “(a)way station”. While her brother hides, she shares a lot of history about the “untouchables,” Black South Indians and how women are treated in India, especially “dark-complexioned women like her.” As she talks, journalist Melody Wells (Kenya Wilson) learns that this woman sitting across from her looking like a soul sister is “passing for Black.”

We get a crash course in Indian history along with a racial history lesson too. Since when is being a Black woman a radical and preferred destination? Melody is broadsided by this motorcycle-riding California College of the Arts lecturer. A Black-woman wannabee, she kind of coasts through the history lesson.

Chipp says Black folks invented forgiveness. . . we also seem to have no problem with honorary Black people who join the race when politically expedient and then diss the disguise as soon as possible.

Melody does not let the visiting “Black woman” get away with juxtaposing her unique experience with blackness with that experienced by her sisters and ancestors for 500+ years.

I am not feeling pretense Black people either. I don’t care how many bell hooks books they have

read or Ntozake Shange poetry they can recite. It was a real twist to see Kala professing Blackness. One wonders if this is a phase. Kala has just escaped her fate or delayed it—if karma is real. She is not in India; she is in America. She is not fighting for women’s liberation; she is here saving herself.

The alliances between Black Americans and the Indigenous people – civilized tribes who owned Black people, Irish and Jews and Chinese and South Asians – Indians, Pakistani, Bengali who stood with Black people until “they got over” is one-sided, *The Conductor* exposes. Black people do not benefit from the fraternity or in this case sorority expected in such alliances. These connections are forgotten, the crisis is avoided, or a new landscape is reached. As Chipp says to Parmar, as soon as they can—they all cross over and “become white.”

The Conductor is about getting paid—no one is working for free or enslaved to an idea of a “promised land.” I like Chipp’s attitude. He is a man with values, whose first line of defense is overhead-- who is signing the check? Who is looking out for me?

“Reed can always be counted on to explore new territory in film, theater, fiction, and non-fiction. For over one hundred years film, theater, books, and thousands of newspaper articles, which are often cliché-ridden, have defined the racial divide as being between Blacks and whites. Reed’s play, *The Conductor*, shows that Blacks and whites are not the only racial groups contributing to the racial divide” (press release).

For tickets visit <https://theaterforthenewcity.net/shows/the-conductor/> Thursday Oct. 13, Friday Oct.14, Saturday Oct.15 at 8:00 Sunday Oct. 16 matinee at 3:00 pm

Tickets are \$18.00. For information call: 212-254-1109