



Adrienne Kennedy

“ “ *My only salvation is to write.* ” ”

Quick Facts

- * Born in 1931
- * African-American playwright
- * Her first play was *Funnyhouse of the Negro* (1964)

Biography

Adrienne Kennedy was born on September 15, 1931 in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Her father, an executive secretary for the YMCA, and mother, a teacher were very loving parents whose stories and good examples influenced many aspects of her works. Kennedy was a very gifted child. Remarkably at the age of three, she learned how to read. When she was four years old, her family moved to Cleveland, Ohio. Because they moved into an integrated neighborhood, Kennedy’s life became slightly rigid. In order to overcome this obstacle, Kennedy developed a “dramatic inner life” (Gates 2080). She would watch the people around her, especially her family, as if they were in a play. Kennedy used these images in her head as composites of the characters in her plays.

Two weeks after Kennedy graduated from Ohio State University with a degree in elementary education, she married Joseph C. Kennedy. After six months of marriage, Joseph was sent to Korea so Kennedy moved in with her parents. Pregnant with her first child, she spent this time of awaiting her husband’s return writing her first plays. When Joseph returned from Korea, he decided to move his family to New York where he could further his education at Columbia Teacher’s College. While Joseph continued his studies, Kennedy pursued her interest in writing through a creative writing class at Columbia University and at the American Theater Wing. In 1961, when the family moved to Africa, she started the play *Funnyhouse of the Negro*. She finished this play in Italy where her family was forced to move due to a difficult pregnancy with her second son. This Obie Award winning play would go on to launch her career as a playwright.

This page was researched and submitted by: Angela Seanoa, Jessica Fashant, and Justin Brown on 10/19/98.



Adrienne Kennedy

Biography continued

Kennedy's unique style of writing has greatly influenced different aspects of the theater. She created her own dramatic vision in which she used various theatrical devices such as masks, nontraditional music, characters being played by more than one actor, and the transforming of one character into another. Her writing is unique because "it demonstrates the political potential of abstract theatrical language" as in *Funny House of the Negro* (Gates 2079). Clive Barnes wrote in his review of her work that "what she writes is a mosaic feeling" (Gates 2080). He describes her as being unlike any other African-American writer because she is concerned with being poetic rather than realistic.

Adrienne Kennedy's writing has been described as being vivid and imaginative. The reader or actor can sense that Kennedy enjoys what she is doing and that she practically puts her life into her work. Kennedy has the ability to entwine many different influences into her works; because of this, her writings reflect a synthesis of artistry and craft.



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