Lesbian Lieutenant to Sue NY Gov. Cuomo

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Michelle Parkerson and Stormé Delarverié:

The Filmmaker Celebrates a Black Woman's Courage

Filmmaker Michelle Parkerson with cinematographer Charles Mahorney

Filmmaker Mich
Getting the Word Out a

I AM A CHILD OF DREAD
BORN OF VEILED FACE AND MASTER
NUMBER
A SABLE EYE FULL OF LOZ AND
ARMAGEDDON
I GOT DE LOVELOCK ON MY HAIR
GOT AN OUTLOOK ON THE FUTURE
ONE LOVE

By Jewelle Gomez

Thus reads the final love letter to Loz from Sephra, the dying warrior of Michelle Parkerson's short story "Odds and Ends" which appears in her collection of poetry and prose, Waiting Rooms. *The story is one of the few works of fantasy fiction published by a Black woman and tells a harsh yet romantic tale for desire and heroism. This poetic note offers a small insight into the spirit that surrounds the work of Michelle Parkerson. Her fimsm, poetry and fiction are suffused with the light of mysticism, commitment and reality. They seem to both investigate and celebrate as if Parkerson would see the world from all outer angles and still insist you know the world's most important inner core. If a lesbian sensibility is ever to be defined it will most assuredly include Michelle's name. Her poems and stories ring with the sensuality of women loving women. Her works on film — which include a profile of jazz singer, Betty Carter;* Gotta Make this Journey, *a documentary about the a capella singing group, Sweet Honey in the Rock and the recently released* Stormé: The Lady of the Jewel Box *— all glow with same quality.*

In a recent telephone interview, I talked with Michelle Parkerson, a native of Washington, DC, about the development of her interest in media after her initial focus on theater at Temple University, and about racism, the economics and politics of being an artist, and her vision. We had much in common. We both studied theater and had worked in film and video professionally. Often we'd had parallel experiences in our attempts to use technology to expound on and celebrate the Black lesbian experience. Laughter and sighs of recognition overlapped our words. The rhythm of talking was that of two women with not nearly enough time together but who knew where the heart was. The questions were of cursory import. Michelle's responses filled those gaps in history that we, as communicators pledged to light with our testimony.

JG: Which art form did you work in first?

MP: Writing came first. I've always loved to write. I've not always done it successfully and am yet learning how to write. It was just something I liked from childhood. But then I got involved in film at the university between 1970 and 1974. I switched from theater to media and film production in my sophomore year because the theater curriculum was rather limited for Black students in terms of performance. You knew you would never get to be the lead in anything. So after I got all of the technical classes under my belt, why stay there? I found that media, radio and film were all a natural extension of performance and of writing. The underpinning of all the productions that you undertake is a written structure, a treatment to expound on your ideas. So you've got to be able to write in order to produce. In order to translate vision to concept and concept to product, you've got to be able to write.

Sharon Farmer

Stormé Delarverié, 1986

JG: What were your earliest or most vivid media memories?

MP: The omnipotence of television was something that those of us growing up in the 1950s were witness to. I remember very vividly things like the [1963] march on Washington; after Kennedy was killed seeing Lee Harvey Oswald's assassination while I was eating cereal. Most of our history was fed to us via this visual medium. A lot of people today rely on television to tell them what happened before and what's happening now and what to expect. Luckily reading filled in the blanks for me, because we needed that. Seeing the March on Washington knowing my parents were there (*I interrupted to ask if she was living in D.C. herself at this time*).

Right! I was in D.C. seeing this event unfold on television! Isn't that deep! Talk about via, via, via!

Another influence was my mother. She was a very avid movie and theater goer and taught me to look at the lighting, look at the costumes by Adrian, the directing by Frank Capra. Look at what Vincente Minnelli did here with Ava Gardner. And we used to watch Loretta Young religiously. That was my real contact with the world of film and theater and artists. She kindled that in me and my father was a great support once I knew I liked theater. He used to run me to auditions all the time. They were great to have because few parents understand kids who want to be artists, or even adults who want to be artists!

JG: Tell me the difference for you between working in video and in film.

MP: Each has its own beauty; its own relationship to light and shadow and color. The wonder of the process is exploring what each has to offer and how it lends that to whatever subject matter you focus on. Video, for me, is a more immediate showcase. We are used to seeing video, i.e., the six o'clock news; most of the things we see on TV are video generated. But we see film as a more theatrical experience. Even when seeing it in theaters that are little tiny boxes, we see film as something that immortalizes. You can see video now on large screens but it's not the same experience. It's still a more intimate medium. And film is more epic. I enjoy the immortalization process that is film, to create an epic moment that's blazing across people's memory. And I enjoy video if it's something you want people to get into and remember it because you got *that* close to a person so candidly.

JG: In the 1960s when Blacks made major inroads into television, there was a constant battle with white technicians: make-up artists, lighting designers, etc., who didn't know how to deal with dark skin tones and directors who didn't care that Black people looked green or that their features faded. In your video about Sweet Honey in the Rock, the quality of color and texture is magnificient, as if you were a painter. How do you work on that or do you?

MP: The process is kind of miraculous because there are so many ways that the image has to filter through other people and technology to get to be what we see. I'm very aware of the image and the flaws in my work so that each production is another training stage for me to get better at it. I'm constantly struggling to perfect the imagery. That is so important when you're trying to convey a message. A lot of filmmakers with political fervor have felt in the past that

it's okay if the stuff is out of focus or the sound is not actually up to snuff. The issue itself (housing or welfare mothers for example) is supposed to carry you through a poorly made film or a technically flawed film. In the mainstream media, as in your experience, it doesn't matter how Black folks come across in a visual experience. It doesn't matter about the range of what we are, the many different colors and textures of what we are. There's no such palette in a mainstream media sensibility. With Sweet Honey, it was kind of natural because they presented themselves the way they are: very vibrant, vocally and visually. It was also inherent in the subject itself. The image was very important

In *Stormé* [Parkerson's new film] there is an interesting friction of visual imagery. There are scenes that are very theatrically lit, nightclub and nighttime scenes in New York City that have the reds, the blues, the siennas. There are some scenes that are strictly *verite*, whatever light was there we got it, like in a storage place or the back of a Yellow Cab at three o'clock in the morning. Whatever light was on 45th Street we took. I happen to have two great cinematographers with wonderful eyes. I've always prayed for a cadre or just one cinematographer who could work with consistency to help me work out my vision. And I've been blessed here.

JG: What drew you to the Jewel Box Revue? [The subject of Michelle's newest film is a popular troupe of female impersonators and Stormé, a woman cross-dresser who worked and toured with them.]

Stormé DeLarverié is 66 years old and doing well as a bodyguard in New York City. She's full of show biz lore and a lot of streetwise knowledge. Her father was white, her mother was Black and she grew up in New Orleans in the '20s. So there's a whole 'nother — 'nother kind of history built into that, layers and layers of America. Show biz stuff but also political stuff.

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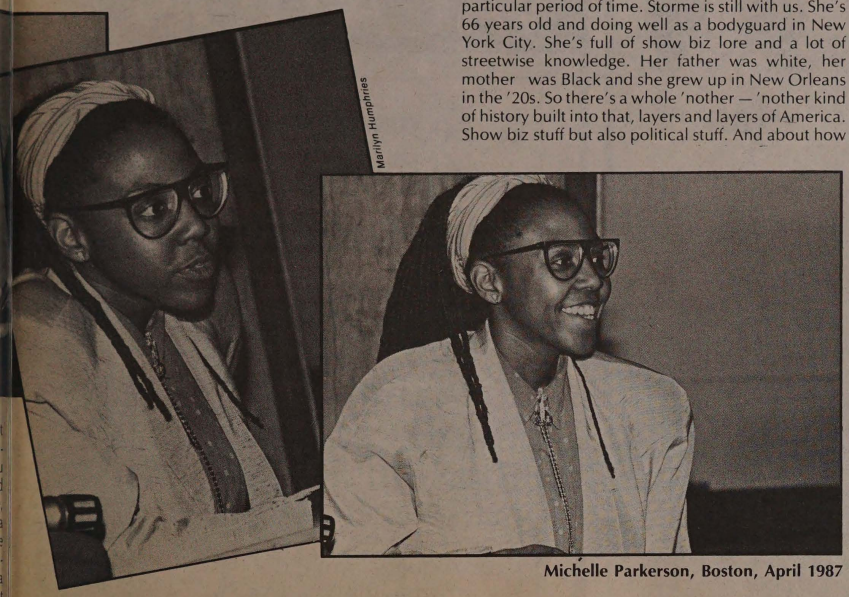
elle Parkerson: bout Where We've Been

MP: The idea has been with me for a while. My mother was talking to my aunt about it and it caught my attention. She talked about how the one woman was dressed as a man and the men were dressed as women. I, at twelve, was not supposed to be hearing this kind of "perversion," of course. And forever my interest was sparked. Twenty years later, processing through my own coming out as a Black lesbian, the idea came to me. Finding this as a way to express some sense of the history and sense of the pride about who I am as a woman who loves women; how I feel about my brothers who love men. And how I feel about men and women who choose cross-dressing as a form of expression and who chose to take on the art of illusion which is what impersonation really is all about.

What was embodied in the Jewel Box Revue was that sense of the art form. It was a lavish show on the level of the Folies Bergères. Fabulous costumes, wonderful set design, original music, comedy; not the kind of lip-synching that we associate with drag shows now. It was the first successful touring show of female impersonators in American history. And it was one of the first successful integrated female impersonation shows. It was composed of white, Black, Hispanic and Native American performers and toured the Black theater circuit in the 1950s and '60s when segregation was still the word. It was very successful at the Apollo Theater [in Harlem] and was one of the best selling shows they ever had at the Howard Theater here in D.C. It did the chitlin circuit: Baltimore, Chicago, etc. So it has some fascinating history and people involved in it.

Ultimately it's more a profile of Stormé DeLarverié. I see and understand the dearth of material about male impersonation, let alone about a Black woman who was a male impersonator in that particular period of time. Storme is still with us. She's 66 years old and doing well as a bodyguard in New York City. She's full of show biz lore and a lot of streetwise knowledge. Her father was white, her mother was Black and she grew up in New Orleans in the '20s. So there's a whole 'nother — 'nother kind of history built into that, layers and layers of America. Show biz stuff but also political stuff. And about how one takes a touring company of female impersonators by car across the country, through the South. Being stopped on highways by state troopers because they were a mixed group. And then they find out the person who's driving the convertable is, in fact, a woman dressed as a man and in the car are Blacks and whites. It was way out!



Marilyn Humphries

Michelle Parkerson, Boston, April 1987

That's what I have in common with other Black independent filmmakers. We want to demystify the process and say: We can all tell our stories. And there's a way for these stories to get out and not just be in cans on somebody's shelf. Masses can see it. That's where the power of it is for me as a political person.

The film was a good way to get my feet wet because I wanted to make more statements about the experience of Black lesbians and gay people. And I still want to do it in a dramatic form after I see this film through this process. There are so many stories and ain't nobody started to tell them yet. How many scripts, how many films, how many videos could come out of our experience. We could tell our own lives on film. That's what I have in common with other Black, independent filmmakers. We want to demystify the process and say: You have access to this. We can all tell our stories. And there's a way for these stories to get out and not just be in cans on somebody's shelf. Masses can see it. It's amazing for me to realize where *Gotta Make This Journey* has been seen. People call from Mali, from Hackensack. Media reach is amazing. That's where the power of it is for me as a political person.

JG: Do you think that money is one of the reasons we don't work in film and video as much as others do?
MP: Money is a monster and if I sound a little caustic it's because I'm trying to finish the film under pressure of deadline with very little money. A lot of it has to do with subject matter. After you have some experience that people acknowledge and you're out here looking for money you find that the subject matter, like in the case of *Stormé*, has a lot to do with the difficulty in finding funding. *Gotta Make This Journey* was done fast, Bang! Four months and completed. *Stormé* has been two years. But then the Betty Carter film took four years!

With *Stormé* it's been very tough, although it has been interesting to see who has supported it. I was surprised that the Corporation for Public Broadcasting became one of the major funders. With Reagan as he is, the type of projects that CPB funds often reflect the attitudes of the administration. And this is not necessarily one of them!

JG: There is an intense fire in much of your writings. How does that translate in your visual work?
MP: Fire is the word you used and that's your experience of it. I don't know that I'd use that word. But if fire is what you want to talk about I think that the writing is a more reflective form of expression for me whereas the films and videos focus on outward and try to get your attention about other people in the world who are making contributions or making wonderful disturbances in the world. So it's not so much a mirror. Although it is a mirror in some sense: it does reflect our experience as Black women and people out here trying to survive on this planet. It's all there whether you focus on a person or even on a group who do a certain thing. So I think if there's fire in the visual material it comes from the experience of these people being candid with me.

JG: Are you going to work on more of your writing [I asked full of hope]?
MP: There should be a book coming out this year from Essex Hemphill's press, Be Bop Books [D.C]. It's called *Hemlines and Handkerchiefs*. While the film has been going through its transitions I've been blessed to be able to write more essays and that anchors me. Ideally it would be nice to be able to do film one-half of the year and then write the other half. The essays are a new exercise that I'm really enjoying and a therapy for me while I'm trying to finish this film. A lot of the essays have been about either the project itself or about Black women filmmakers.

JG: Who are the people you either saw, read about, made you think, or drew you along into shaping your art?
MP: There's a long list because people give you all kinds of things and some of them are not recognized in any public sense at all. It's just awesome! You know, why give a running list of half of my world! You know like Aunt Mildred. I mean where would I be without Aunt Mildred!

Fire may not be the word that Michelle Parkerson would use to describe her work. Perhaps fire is simply the result of experiencing her work. Fire as in excitement, the urge to move and shake the world she's just given us in a few, short lines or strips of celluloid. Fire like I felt when I heard her poem "Convalescence," from Waiting Rooms.

You detect scars
as words escape these mouths
Nerve burlesque endings
in splintered smiles

My sisters are the casualties
the saviors of worlds
we do not create

Running wounds
open sores
urge our dreams.

Waiting Rooms can be ordered from Common Ground Press, P.O. Box 50368, Washington DC 20004.

Stormé, the Lady of the Jewel Box *will have its west coast premiere in San Francisco at the International Gay and Lesbian Film Festival, June 19-27. In July, it will be shown in London at the National Film Theatre. For booking information write: Eye of the Storm Productions, 1716 Florida Ave. NW #2, Washington, DC, 20009.*

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