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Humes 103

Dr. O'Geen

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*Dissonance* and Productive Conversations About Race

Marci Duncan and Kerry Sandell began to write *Dissonance* in the summer of 2020. That May, the world watched in horror as a white police officer knelt on the neck of a Black man for nearly nine minutes, taking his life. *Dissonance* was inspired not only by the murder of George Floyd, but by the outrage that followed it. This emotion appears several times in the ninety-minute play, in which two old friends discuss what it truly means to sustain an interracial friendship in 2020's America. *Dissonance* does an effective job of emphasizing unity as a conversational goal through its plot and physical blocking choices, though at times it seems to drown in the sheer expanse of its own ambition.

Duncan and Sandell's primary objective for *Dissonance* is to promote conversations about race. Toward the middle of the play, Angela, a Black woman, argues that Lauren, her white friend, does not understand code-switching. Lauren responds that she feels hurt when Angela discounts their friendship because she, as a white woman, cannot code-switch. Ultimately, this conversation is successful because both women are able to accept criticism while giving their own. Such productive exchanges of information are also conveyed through the show's blocking. When she agrees to share her authentic experience as a Black woman in America, Angela is sitting in a chair. By the end of her story, Lauren is sitting down with her. Having a difficult conversation brings the two women to the same level, allowing them to literally see eye-to-eye. Blocking choices such as this one go hand in hand with examples of productive two-sided

conversation in order to suggest that anyone can effectively discuss race if they go about it in the right way.

Duncan and Sandell's secondary reason for writing is to communicate that conversations about race, though hazardous, should be approached with a singular intention: unity. When tension begins to materialize as conflict in the play, both characters take a moment to stop themselves and confirm that they want to continue before arguing further. These pauses emphasize the importance of self-awareness in a conflict. After the confrontation causes a photo of the two women to shatter, they work together to sweep up the broken glass. This choice illustrates that exchanging potentially damaging truths is acceptable if it leads to reconstruction. Notably, the photo is frameless when the two women hang it up again, but they seem to value it even more in its changed state. This, too, supports the writers' vision of repair and unity. Finally, the friends hug at the end of their argument, a physical expression of their commitment to each other. With these blocking choices, Duncan and Sandell illustrate how conversations about race should ultimately bring people together, even if they must initially cause conflict that briefly causes division.

*Dissonance*, at times, takes on more than it can handle. Lauren and Angela's conversation touches on everything from police brutality to hair products. The dialogue often skips to the next issue before it has appropriately covered the first one. The writers' attempt to include every possible racial injustice in the script causes the play to come across as unrealistic. In a single conversation, Angela's character must seek to explain every example of discrimination that she has ever experienced. At the same time, Lauren is asked to empathize with so many anecdotes of systematic racism that it seems impossible for her to properly absorb any of it. As an art form, one of the play's major limitations is its singularity. In creating one artwork that tries to

encompass so much experience and emotion all in itself, Duncan and Sandell dilute the impact of their characters' candor. The play's consequent artificiality may discourage the very conversations that the writers hope to inspire in their audience.

As a viewer, *Dissonance* showed me that it is possible to have conversations about race with the people you care about. In the Q&A session that followed the play, Duncan and Sandell stressed the importance of striving for unity. I have engaged in emotionally damaging conflicts as well as conflicts that led me to new understandings. *Dissonance* caused me to revisit my own personal disputes and realize that those of the latter type were more productive. However, I have never engaged in a personal conversation about racial injustice, so my ability to relate to the play is somewhat limited. If, in the future, I have such an opportunity, I will be sure to set a productive intention for my conversation.

On my honor, I have neither given nor received unauthorized information regarding this work, I have followed and will continue to observe all regulations regarding it, and I am unaware of any violation of the Honor Code by others.