

Remarks by Kenny Leon at “Open Dialogue 2010: Building the 21st Century Agenda for Cultural Democracy” Event in Chicago, Illinois

MR.LEON: Thank you and good afternoon. It is my joy, and extreme pleasure, to be here with you today—and last night, the fellowship, and the food, and the music was great.

That character I just performed was Styles from *Sizwe Banzi Is Dead*, a work from one of my favorite playwrights: white South African Athol Fugard. I open with an excerpt from Athol Fugard’s *Banzi Is Dead* because it’s a perfect example of the beauty of theatre. All you need is a willing audience, a capable actor, and the imagination just goes wild. But, Mr. Styles understood that he had the ability to capture life with a photograph. It captured life’s stories, hopes and dreams, joy and pain, mistakes, and celebrations.

I am a theatre artist. I’m a story teller, and in theatre we capture life in the same way only we share it with an audience. The actor and audience learn from one another in the moments that they share. I have a t-shirt that says, “Film is art, Theatre is life, Television is furniture” (Laughter and Applause.) That’s a joke, I do own a television though, that’s a joke. But, I’m a story teller so what an amazing profession that I’ve been blessed to be a part of.

I pause to say thank you, a heartfelt thank you, to the Illinois Arts Council for inviting me here and The Association of American Cultures for having me here to speak at this year’s Open Dialogue National Multiculturalism Symposium.

This has been a phenomenal year for me. Two weeks ago—three weeks ago—we closed *Fences* on Broadway starring Denzel Washington and Viola Davis. (Applause.) Thank you. Yesterday, I found out that I will direct Katori Hall’s new play *The Mountaintop*. A fictitious account of Dr. (Martin Luther) King’s last night on the planet, Starring Samuel L. Jackson and Halle Berry. So you’re the first audience to know that! (Applause.) We will start rehearsal in February on that. Also, I’ve just agreed to do sort of my first feature film called *Babylon*, which is focused on the young kids who are used as drug smugglers coming out of Jamaica.

But amongst all this, it is truly a pleasure to be here today, as I enjoy speaking and fellowshipping with fellow artistic solders that are as interested and concerned about preserving cultures, and promoting the arts, as I am.

Currently, I am the artistic director of True Colors Theatre Company, where our mission is to produce African American classics. Some people think African American classics are an oxymoron, but that’s what we do. And we also produce bold new work by other cultures. Our core values: boldness, laughter, abundance, and respect. We envisioned the theatre as a place where we could all learn from one another. Embrace our commonalities and celebrate our differences; a theatre that looks like the world.

The subject of this symposium, building the twenty first century agenda for cultural democracy—Ah—Me, I envision art and culture in the Twenty First century to look like this: A world where the arts are no longer void from the curriculum in schools. (Applause.)

Educators will use the arts to nurture the creative minds of young people. I want to hear in my world young children playing the musical scales over, and over, and over again on the piano or a violin. In my world, art will be used as a tool to teach in all fifty states.

By participating in the arts, children will become motivated and challenged to explore and to create. I envision a world that does not look at the arts as a frivolous activity, but as engagement of intellect, creativity, passion, and self discovery. A world where everyone's history is important. I envision audiences from different backgrounds, classes, ages, and races sitting next to each other at the theatre. A world where everyone's art is equally funded.

With every new project I'm always asking: who's listening? Who's the audience? I love diversity, and I have found that to have diversity in the audience you must have a commitment to create that diversity. And you must value the beauty of multiculturalism in and of itself.

I know, some think that the word multiculturalism is dated, and that was an 80's thing (Laughter.) –but I love it. There, I said it; multiculturalism! (Laughter and Applause.)

You know, it's sad to say, but I think America is this way—you either complain, or you do something about it. Is America racist? Yes. Complain or do something about it. Make history or be a part of history.

When I directed Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* on Broadway, it was very important for me to know that this particular production would reach new audiences. I was honored to have the talent of Miss. Phylicia Rashad to give Lena Younger a fresh portrayal. But when I called Phylicia she said, "Kenny, I'm not right for that role. I'm not old enough, and physically, I'm not big enough." I said, that's the one thing to happen to people of color. We don't look at our work and reinterpret it for a new generation.

I said Phylicia—go reread the script and you will see that Lena Younger's husband died when he was in his forty's. He died a young African American. Read it, you will see that she could at most be like fifty five years old. She's still sexy, she's still got life going on. And in that story, it's about a family going somewhere to live, not going somewhere to die. Phylicia Rashad reread the script, called me up and says, "I'm in." She went on to win a Tony Award, the first African American woman to win a leading actress (Tony) for a play. It's a shame that that happened in—what?—2004, it's the first time an African American had won in that category. But it's because she brought freshness to it.

I approached Audra McDonald for the role of Ruth. Audra said, "Well, folks always play this role like she's a victim." I said, Ruth in *A Raisin in the Sun* is the woman that holds the family together. She is the real one with the dream. She's the one who allows Walter to explore wherever he's going, and she's the one who really nurtures mother's dream as well. So, Audra McDonald took the role. She won a Tony Award, not that that's a sign of greatness, but she did win a Tony Award. (Laughter.)

But—Folks ask me why Sean Combs for Walter Lee? One: He's the hardest working man that I've ever meet. He'll work sixteen hours, then he will go home and work some more. He built a

replica of the set for *A Raisin in the Sun*, and not many of us can afford to do that. (Laughter.) He built a replica of the set of *A Raisin in the Sun* and put it in his Park Avenue home—So that he could go home and live like a poor man. (Laughter.)

But the real question—why Sean Combs? Diversity. Let's make history or be a part of history. Diddy (Sean Combs) was also born a poor guy in America; inner city. So he understood that side of the dream. He's also one of the few that understood the other side of the dream. But, the real reason for Sean Combs was diversity. Introduce this new classic to a new generation.

Folks came to see P-Diddy, but left having witnessed the beauty of Lorraine Hansberry's words. (Applause.) They experienced a positive evening in the theatre, many of them for the very first time. We have to be a part of history, or make history.

A Raisin in the Sun attracted a richly diverse audience, with a strong representation from the African American community. Grandparents, grandchildren, young, middle aged, professional, celebrities, regular folks, *Raisin* spoke to the possibility of theatre.

I found similar success with August Wilson's *Fences* on Broadway. We had a phenomenal cast, with great leading actors. We saw great success with this production; 10 Tony nominations. A win for best play revival, best leading actor and actress with Denzel (Washington) and Viola (Davis), a wonderful ensemble of actors. That production now has the box office record for most money generated at any production at the Cort Theatre. That's since 1920.

But I was more impressed with the diversity that I saw nightly outside the theatre; a line stretching down Forty Eighth Street. Every night I would walk along that line and notice people from all backgrounds: White, Black, Asian, Hispanic, people from different races, cultures, lifestyles; a nontraditional Broadway audience. But it looked beautiful to me.

The people made that happen, and the art rewarded them. People didn't have just another theatre experience at *Fences*; they lived it with the performers. People from the audience were verbally reacting to what was going on, on stage. When the audience is involved in that way, you know you have captured their imagination. You have captured the essence of life in such a way that it sheds light on the human condition.

My grandmother had a similar theatre experience. My grandmother, she was a great lady. She died in 1992 at 87 years old, but I think of her daily. Every day, I try to live a life that is worthy of my grandmother's memory. A woman clear on values, a woman clear on spirituality, a woman clear on respect of others, a woman clear on purpose of life, and a woman clear on passion in life. In memory of the values of my grandmother and the things that she taught me I wear tennis shoes every day, with everything, to remind to stay grounded.

I'm just a country boy from Tallahassee Florida. I am the product of generational prayers. I'm living for those who came before me, and trying to give to those yet to come.

I recall my grandmother's first play only four years before her death. It was a production of a play called *T Bone n Weasel* at the Alliance Theatre. It was a comedy and my grandmother was

one of—if not the only African American at that time in the audience, one of very few. And during the play, when one of the characters made bad choices, my grandmother would say, “Oh no baby, don’t do that, no.” (Laughter.) She would say that out loud. And when they did things right, “Mhmm babe, mhmm.” (Laughter.) At intermission people were asking me, “Who is that lady?” (Laughter.) I told them, that’s my grandma, don’t mess with “Maynee”. After intermission the rest of the audience filed back into the theatre and you could hear every one in the audience as the play went on, they said, “Oh no baby, no, don’t do that.” (Laughter.) Amazing things happen when we sit next to each other.

We can’t devalue our contribution to the world: the need to gather as a community, and often as a world community. I believe great stories and great art help us to better understand our relationship to each other. The world that I envision is a place where we better understand each other. I believe great stories and great art will help us along that path. I have found that our culture defines us, but our humanity connects us. Cultural democracy in the times we live in can be found in experiences we have to freely enjoy the art and traditions of others.

Artists aren’t lovers. Understand this; it is up to us, and only us. Those of us in this room, maybe a small group here in Chicago. Artists who want to inspire the living of life. So let’s take on the world, lets (cell phone rings) turn off the phone. (Laughter.) Let’s continue the movement. Let’s inspire the world to love again, to feel, to understand, to be generous, to laugh. There is nothing frivolous about that. Let’s stop apologizing for the arts. Boldly say, “It makes us better.”

As we do the work that inspires, let us also make that a reality. We should not think about it as too difficult to commit too. The world can look however we want it to look. Institutions, organizations, companies, are all made up of individuals. The people, and the choices they make, determine what our world look like.

I’m interested in what you are going to do today to meet the challenges of a new century. We all have a part to play. Some act, some direct, some sing, some write, some sow, some paint, some advocate, some finance. But our first step: a new attitude; to collectively give voice to the importance and place of art in our world. It’s as necessary as water, and you know it. We live, we love, breathe the art we create. When you live it, when you love it, when you breathe it, it’s a beautiful thing.

It’s also okay to support art we don’t quite understand. Some good art opens a window to a question. Not only those things familiar should get our attention and our money. We must also collaborate and learn from one another as we continue to mobilize and increase understanding of the importance of the arts and garner the support of our local communities.

I have noticed that at some point, the importance of our efforts have been summed up in monetary terms by asking questions like, “What’s the economic impact of the arts?” Well, we can answer that a million ways. And satisfy ourselves in the short term. But shouldn’t the questions posed sound something like this: How do the arts enrich lives? How important is art to the sustainability of our various cultures? What would life look like without music? What would life look like without painting? Without sculpture? Without dancing? What would life look like

without theatre or cinematography? And what if the past didn't matter? Are we only interested in the "now"? In the pop culture?

In the history of our culture we have witnessed some amazing artists, beautiful people; multicultural and talented. But what about the grand children of artists long past? What is their world going to look like?

Folks always talk about the deficit. What about the cultural deficit? I mean, what is our grandchildren's world going to look like? I think our grandchildren's world should have soul. And metaphorically, the arts are our soul. And it's up to us, the people, to protect that. Wither your ancestors got here shackled and chained, lying in the bowel of a slave ship. Or wither your ancestors stepped on this soil standing upright, seeking religious or political freedom. We are all Americans and entitled to its privileges, responsibilities, and benefits. All of our mother's stories, rituals, songs, are worthy of being preserved and shared with the broader community. That makes us richer.

Let's start asking the right questions. What do we need in order to create a more beautiful world? What's the price tag on that? How can we persuasively articulate what we feel about the value of arts in our country? If not us, who then?

In this twenty first century society, let us proclaim that the arts and culture industry is very important to our world. We must start to articulate clearly our worth. Find the words. Creative thinking and creative expression are values worth more than gold and we the people must protect these values, as they are at the heart and foundation of which our country is built. We nurture creative thinking; we solve the problems of the world. If we make music we communicate universally.

Artists must be given the green light to try, to attempt, to explore. Young children must be reminded and encouraged to think creatively. Young playwrights must be rewarded for exploration and encouraged to stay at it. A painter needs to be able to paint her canvas and have the resources to raise her children. Exposure to the arts must be promoted to develop better, more creative, dynamic lawyers. More creative, dynamic mayors. More creative, dynamic bankers and accountants.

What do we have to offer? Theatre reinforces the good about collaboration. Through our stories and our audiences, we reinforce communication skills, and we can boost self esteem. We remind others that they are not alone. We heal broken hearts. Through the arts we're reminded, in the grand scheme of things, we're quite small. We strengthen our bonds to each other as humans and we encourage possibility.

We all must do our part to promote, sustain, and advocate for the arts. I'm asking you in this room to take the extra step. We can do more. We can say more. We can make more happen. America needs our voice. It's in understanding what's of value to us. It's in how we vote for elected officials. It's in how we talk. It's in how we spend our money. It's in how we raise our children. It's in how we network and with whom. It's in how we hold each other accountable. It's in the people to seize the moment.

On the surface a work of art may entertain and may educate too, but when we go to a play, or an opera, or purchase a piece of art, what do we expect to receive? Sometimes we receive the intangible, an exuberant feeling. Whatever it may be, but it's something. It connects us to each other; to that which is human. A piece of life, piece of joy, piece of love. And it's not important to define it, but to know that it's there. Art allows us to receive a fleeting piece of what we all look forward to in life: our connectedness to each other.

“So live, and when thy summons comes to join the innumerable caravan which moves to that mysterious realm, where each shall take his chamber in the silent halls of death, thou go not, like the quarry-slave at night, scourged to his dungeon, but, sustained and soothed by an unfaltering trust, approach thy grave like one who wraps the drapery of his couch about him, and lies down to pleasant dreams”. That's a poem by W.C. Bryant, reprinted in August Wilson's *Gem of the Ocean*. You die by how you live.

How are you living? What passion is driving your life? I live everyday wondering how I can be better; a better man, a better human, a better artist. My connection to you today is strong. Our time shared here is not without purpose. If nothing else, let us remember that we can make our families, our cities, our country, our world, better; richer, more tolerant of difference through our work in the arts.

A true democracy has equality and free will as its corner stone. A country's body of art must be reflective of its entire people. As we move forward in time let's do our part to make sure we leave no people behind. Only if we illuminate the beauty of the specific cultures of our multicultural world will we allow the most gorgeous and beautiful songs to be heard. We're better when we are all at the table. Thank you, and may God continue to bless you and the resiliency of the human spirit. (Applause.)