BOOKS

Art and Loss

Thulani Davis Talks About Her New Novel, Maker of Saints

BY ANGELA ARDS

Thulani Davis's provocative first novel, *1959*, combined the story of a 12-year-old girl with a portrait of a black Southern town transformed by the civil rights movement. Her new novel, *Maker of Saints* (Scribner, 250 pp., $22), transplants that black bottom to the Quarter, a multiethnic New York inner city, and depicts a generation that survived the '60s only to find itself in the '80s, complete with Reagan and Rambo, AIDS and crack, and so many people dying.

The novel opens with Bird Kincaid, a painter turned radio engineer, in stasis. Two months earlier her best friend, a performance artist, fell from her apartment window. In a soft spot in the sidewalk, Alex Decatur's crumpled frame leaves a gruesome silhouette and Bird haunted by nightmares of her friend "forever falling." Years earlier, Alex had given "birth to Bird the artist simply by being the first person to look at her paintings and see them as art." From that moment on, like Toni Morrison's Sula and Nel, they were girls together. Divas, really. Women familiar with "blues places where you could hear tell of a sudden death or of a madman who roamed the streets out to kill a bitch," and who used their wits to keep out of harm's way.

Maker of Saints follows Bird as she unravels the mysteries of her friend's death. Among Alex's belongings she finds videotapes and a peculiar phone book, whose pointed omissions and curious details suggest Alex has left behind a story that not even best friends could have shared. Police have ruled the death a probable suicide, but Bird is convinced that art critic Frank Burton, Alex's lover, murdered her friend much as he had earlier attempted to kill her creative spirit with a vicious review.

The novel is also about the limitations of friendship, thwarted dreams, and deciding what's "worth a fight and a blade in the dark." In the conclusion, propelled by a fierce but misguided independence, Bird confronts Burton and her own demons.

In its depiction of an urban, contemporary black experience *Maker of Saints* should not be mistaken for the less race-oriented popular fiction of the so-called black book renaissance. The novel mines literature from *The Arabian Nights* to the Ramayana and the blues, and its hip, familiar tones feel like a homecoming for the diaspora:

Nothing beats this place, Bird thought—life comes from any century, any remote corner of the planet, right to this block, with a band. It's still the Quarter, but jets have changed who's in a quarter now—some of all *the children of slavery, not just the African ones. She laughed when people said, "Oh, that's one of those* changing *neighborhoods." They had no idea. They thought changing meant black and white yuppies buying brownstones. Bird lived in a quarter where people were moving from medieval times into the end of the world.*

If there's one unifying theme in Davis's work, it's the celebration of black culture. She co-wrote and -narrated a documentary on W. E. B. Du Bois and she is at work on a film about 20th-century black artists. Her latest play, *The Trial of Ruby M.*, about a 1952 case Zora Neale Hurston covered in Florida, opens later this year in Los Angeles. And she and Anthony Davis, collaborators on *X: The Life and Times of Malcolm X*, are working together on another opera, *Amistad*, about an 1839 slave ship revolt and the ensuing trial, which the Africans won.

It is another small victory that Davis's book tour is off the Black History Month circuit. Between readings and cities she took a moment to discuss her new novel with the *Voice:*

LINDA HUBERTS

Thulani Davis: "The narrative voice itself is a fiction."

ANGELA ARDS: *What motivated* Maker of Saints?

THULANI DAVIS: My friends and I have been losing a lot of people in the past 10 years. And I would have to call people in my friends' phone books. I was calling all over the planet, and I had no idea when I picked up the phone who I was gonna talk to, even though I'd known the person 20 years and thought I knew every person in their life.

It kind of intrigued me as a device. In a lot of books, somebody might go through a deceased person's phone book, like a detective, but they don't know anything about that person. I thought it would be interesting to discover somebody you knew really well, and how other people knew them in different ways.

AA: *There's a lot of death and loss in the novel, not just Alex's.*

TD: I originally started writing a book about loss, but I thought it was too sad. Then I put in all the stalking, the violence and the terror. I really knew that I had to make it be about regaining yourself, pulling yourself together, about Bird's getting a grip.

AA: *Why did she have to get a grip?*

TD: Because you get stuck in a moment when you get traumatized. A character in my opera has the same dilemma. She's kidnapped into slavery, and when they snatched her they didn't notice her baby lying a distance away on a pallet. She's gone through a mutiny, a court trial, but she can't leave that moment. In the opera she says, "Yeah, I tried to kill those guys, because I had to get back and pick up my baby." For me there are these moments that people can get stuck in. You really have to pull yourself out or not.

AA: *Many of the elements of Alex Decatur's life seem to parallel those of Cuban performance artist Ana Mendieta's.*

TD: Yes and no. Ana had in common with a lot of people I know the experience of starting out life as Latin somewhere in South America and then coming to the airport and suddenly being a person of color. I guess my recollections of Basquiat had something to do with it too. She was working at the same time Basquiat was working and in the same corner of the universe. It was a world in which you could be mistaken for a primitive, even if you went to art school, and where graffiti artists were routinely turned away from parties given in their honor. The doorman would say, "We don't have people like this here." I saw that a lot.

AA: *How did your work in the '70s and '80s with Ntozake Shange and Jessica Hagedorn influence what you do today?*

TD: We were very interested in putting women in the foreground. My female characters, like theirs, make a lot of decisions. They think they're roughly in charge of their destiny. They're trying to be, anyway. I remember I used to think that Ntozake's favorite word was *actual*. "I've decided." That was something she used to say all the time. And the other day somebody told me that my characters make a lot of decisions. They're always trying to do something about their situations, and that struck this person as male. And I said, "Oh no. Black women live very complicated lives. They are making decisions 100 times a day. They're in charge of a lot."

AA: *In the novel, Alex's art blurs the lines between art and life.*

TD: I'm making a point with Alex that artists do blur the lines. A lot of artists really do use real-life material. The thing that's interesting about it—for those who are looking—is that as soon as you start telling it, it still becomes fiction, even though you're using the most obvious life material. The narrative voice itself is a fiction because the narrator is a liar.

I'm very interested in storytelling history and techniques. Alex's stories, her videotapes, are similar to Scheherazade's in *The Arabian Nights*—some woman had to sit up and tell stories in a palace all night to save her life. And then I thought I could make these connections with the blues, and the story of this woman of color who's in grave danger, and who has this incredible creative spirit. The blues is about life-and-death storytelling—like with "Frankie and Johnnie." The passion runs really deep, and somebody might be in danger over somebody else's heartbreak.

AA: *You write in so many forms. Is memoir next on your list?*

TD: Everybody always asks me, "What's the one form you haven't done that you want to do?" and I always say movies, I want to write a screenplay. They never ask me which one *don't* you want to do, and that's the one. Maybe when I'm an old lady. Life's a great adventure, and I think I'm only halfway through mine. I'm still sorting it all out. It's all I can do to do this work. If I had to step back from my own thing and figure out what it meant, that would be hard. Your work is an ongoing memoir. ❖