Understanding Adrienne Kennedy

Philip C. Kolin

In this critical study of Adrienne Kennedy, Philip C. Kolin explores the interrelation-
ship of life and work of one of the most respected African American playwrights. For
more than four decades Kennedy’s theater has raised profound issues about race,
gender, selfhood, and performativity in American culture—topics that Kolin investi-
gates throughout his reading of Kennedy’s career. Making her challenging canon more
accessible, Kolin offers in-depth analyses of her plays, political scripts, and experimen-
tal autobiography, People Who Led to My Plays, as well as examines her neglected
novel, Deadly Triplets, and examples of her short fiction.

Kolin maintains that Kennedy’s plays accentuate the highly experimental theater of
Off Broadway. He traces the fates of Kennedy’s young black and mulatta heroines in
their quest for identity and self-worth in a white, prejudiced world as he discusses her
radical departure from traditional, sequential plots and consistent characterization and
examines her concern with the harrowing territory of the subconscious—a chaotic
world of shifting times, locations, and selves. Kolin argues that Kennedy is justly cele-
brated for representing her protagonists’ fragmentary, conflicting psychological states,
reflecting a host of white, black, and mulatta vantages, both historical and imagined.

Recognizing that Kennedy’s work departs from that of such African American
political activists of the 1960s as Amiri Baraka or Ed Bullins, Kolin demonstrates how
her efforts—including Sun and Sleep Deprivation Chamber—challenge colonialist
hegemonies of prejudice. He stresses that understanding her plays requires an under-
standing of her family and ethnic background, her politics, and even her nightmares.
Kolin demonstrates that Kennedy’s work runs deep with African rituals, Christian sym-
bolism, classical mythology, realities of urban violence, and psychoanalysis, all of
which have shaped her visionary and provocative canon.

Understanding Contemporary American Literature • Matthew J. Bruccoli, series editor

PHILIP C. KOLIN, professor of English at the University of Southern Mississippi, has
published books on Edward Albee, David Rabe, Tennessee Williams, and William
Shakespeare. He recently edited The Tennessee Williams Encyclopedia, and his
Confronting Tennessee Williams’s “A Streetcar Named Desire” remains a widely
acclaimed cultural and historical guide to the classic play.

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Adrienne Kennedy has been a force in American theatre since the early 1960s, influencing generations of playwrights with her hauntingly fragmentary lyrical dramas. Exploring the violence racism visits upon people's lives, Kennedy's plays express poetic alienation, transcending the particulars of character and plot through ritualistic repetition and radical structural experimentation.