

*Sassy Ross*

## THE ART OF COLLABORATION: AN INTERVIEW WITH KWAME DAWES



SASY ROSS: There's a vibrant history of collaboration among writers and artists from the Caribbean. Derek Walcott worked with Paul Simon on the musical, *The Capeman*. Michael Gilkes and Kamau Brathwaite collaborated on film productions of *Sun Poem* and *Mother Poem*. Brathwaite was always engaged with using music--especially Rasta drumming and pocomania drumming as part of his performances. No doubt others did the same during the seventies and eighties and continue to do that now in the jazz vein. Sistren Collective was closely associated with the School of Drama in Jamaica during that time period. My sense is that they worked with Blacka Ellis, Tomlin Ellis and the cadre of dub poets who were working at the time. Opal Palmer Adisa founded the performance duo, Daughters of Yam, with Devorah Major, with who she also published a two-poet anthology. Still, no one has the long and interesting track record of Kwame Dawes. There's *Brimming*, a chapbook, which was presented not only as a live performance with musicians, dancers, singers and readers, but also as an art exhibit with the painter, Brian Rutenberg, whose art inspired the poems. There's *Bruised Totems*, a collection of poems based on the African Art in the Bareiss African Art collection, which also included images. *Wisteria: Twilight Songs from the Swamp Country*, performed live at the Poetry International Festival. *I Saw Your Face* and *Requiem*, based on the art of Tom Feelings. So, I guess I'd like to start at the beginning. When did you first begin to collaborate, and was collaboration part of the literary scene at the time or did it proceed from your personal inclinations?

KWAME DAWES: I was a thirteen year old in high school when Dennis Scott was a teacher there. This was at Jamaica College in Kingston--a school that had an elitist history, but that, by the time I was there in the early seventies--the era of "free education" had become a public school with a wider cross section of people from all economic backgrounds. Scott, a poet and noted theatre director, introduced my second form class to a project that still remains a

source of amazement to me. He had apparently decided to set some poems to performance, with music, movement and a lot of chanting (which worked well for boys) for a staging that as far as I can recall, did not have an audience, but simply had the reward of our going on a field trip to the Jamaica School of Drama, with its avant garde architecture--open spaces, a-symmetrical angles for the large concrete facades and a lot of levels set against a thickly bushed backdrop--there were no real doors, just sliding panels that allowed one to have the sensation of being constantly outdoors even when indoors. In retrospect, I suspect that Scott was just trying to get us to record on tape our performance for his use in a larger production that he may have been working on in the theatre. Whatever the reason, I remember being impressed by the slow, some chaotic, but always deliberate process of working with our voices, with song, with drumming, and with TEXT. All from text. Scott would help us understand the text and then use this understanding to guide what new innovation he would have come up for the class. We would try it and he would shape it until it was working well. This may have been my first experience with collaborative work, even if I did not understand what I was doing. I do know that I found the process exciting.

SASSY: How did you move from theatre into the literary world?

DAWES: Theatre was my entry into the literary world. I began to write plays and be involved with theatrical productions when I was eighteen and an undergraduate at the University of the West Indies. Because I was working with a Christian group, and because our mandate was largely evangelical (even as we theorized that in the tradition of Medieval and Renaissance Drama and poetry of 17th century Britain, great art could come the business of "preaching") all the work we did was original. That plays existed were simplistic church plays that demonstrated no understanding of theatre to speak of and lacked sophistication of character, plot or staging potential. So I began writing for the stage and writing with a very clear sense of the company of actors, musicians, directors, designers and producers I was working with. This may have begun my process of collaboration. Beginning with my word, I was working closely with other artists to create something remarkable. My first play, "In the Warmth of the Cold", was a musical and I collaborated with an Antiguan musician, Oswald Zachariah, to put the show together. The experience was a defining one to me and I was impressed by the pull and push and the give and take of collaboration, but mostly by the way in which the skills of someone else, when merged with your own skills, can produce something beautiful and decidedly new. I don't think that this is a peculiarly Caribbean thing. I think that anyone who begins in theatre and spends time acting, directing, composing and building sets, will start to see the artistic process as fiercely independent and self-centered, and at the same time, profoundly collaborative. I have, since, always sought to work with others on my projects.

SASSY: Was there a number of projects that involved the adaptation of poetry and fiction of Caribbean writers for stage or film during those early years in the theatre?

DAWES: I was constantly impressed by a number of projects. I remember seeing Michael Gilke's treatment of Kamau Brathwaite's Mother Poem and being impressed by the

possibilities there. At the time, I was impressed with the work as a theatrical piece--and I saw it as a great opportunity for theatre. I also remember reading Kamau Brathwaite's *The Arrivants* and being struck by the theatricality of the work, its readability and its intent on being a performance work with multiple voices, with music and with movement. It is all built into the piece. I am actually surprised that no one has staged a full-blown performance of this work. It is desperately needed. The sound track is already built into the piece, and the voices are well laid out. Brathwaite claims to have spoken the whole poem onto tape before transcribing it into written form. I am not entirely convinced by this claim, but to doubt it is quite churlish. I do believe, however, that the work, with its performative superstructure, has been a tremendous influence on me--pushing me to think comfortably about the book length poem of epic scope and work that is rooted in musicality, above everything else. Since then, I have been equally impressed by work by Derek Walcott and Lorna Goodison--to name just two--in this vein. But *The Arrivants* is defining for me. But equally defining, and perhaps more defining in practical terms, is the work of Ntosake Shange, whose choreopoem, "for colored girls who have considered suicide when the rainbow is enuf..." I discovered in the University of the West Indies library in 1981. I was in search of anything labeled poetry by women in a desperate attempt to immerse myself in the feminine poetic voice as I prepared to write a play with an all female cast ("Charity's Come"). I had serious doubts that I could capture the voice of women in credible ways, especially since I knew I was writing a verse play. I read a lot of poetry by women, but when I found Shange's book, I was beside myself with excitement--I wanted to read ahead and yet I was afraid that to read more would lead to disappointment. It was a strange kind of excitement. The work is simply brilliant, but I mention it here, because what it gave me was this model for the single poetic voice to be then shaped into a theatrical piece. Shange says she wrote the choreopoem as one long monologue--a lyric poem, even. Then she began to work on it for the stage with collaborators and started to find that multiple voices resided there even as they were all her voice at some level. I never saw that play until many years later, but I did not need to. I still have it riveted in my mind as one of the most important works for me as a playwright, and, more to the point, as a writer who believes that the poem can have a presence on the stage that is theatrical, powerful and ultimately its own thing. Shange's work is perhaps the seed for all the collaborative work I have done since.

SASSY: Considering the varying nature of your collaborations, which involve not only text but painting and music, would you say that you're equally inspired by what you see on the page as what you see on a canvas or hear in a record?

DAWES: As a writer I am always engaged in the work of other artists in various disciplines, and I can safely say that much of my work is prompted by what I see being performed on the page, on canvass, with music and so on. I have program notes for plays, recitals and poetry readings that are festooned with my handwriting--poems, stretches of theatrical dialogue, passages of prose, sketches, and much else that have been prompted by what I have seen. Often I am not writing to describe what I have seen, but trying to voice what the

work is stirring in me which may have very little to do with the subject of the piece I am looking at. I have long known that art has been a tremendous source of metaphor and image for me. Specifically, when I was writing the poems for *Midland*, I remember going out of my way to purchase books of art by Caribbean artists, and then other classical artists like Van Gogh, to feed me images that I could write against and with. This kind of collaboration is quite private and may have little apparent presence in the poems unless I indicate this in notes for a book. When, for instance, I first encountered Tom Feelings' book, *Middle Passage: Black Cargo/ White Ships*, I was floored by the power of the images. I really was. By the time I was finished going through the book several times, I think I knew that there was at least one poem buried there. But my first impulse was to write to Tom Feelings to thank him for the book. I did not know him at the time. The letter began, Dear Tom Feelings, and then the line broke. It was the first poem in a series of poems that essentially became my letter to him. When I had finished the letter of poems, I sent the thing to him and I was, in many ways, done. I had gone from image to image and responded to these images in verse. Tom was not a conscious collaborator with me in this instance, but his work had fed me the images and emotion to which I could respond in poetry. Some months later, my publishers wondered if I had any slave poems as the BBC was interested in airing some work about slavery. I sent the poems to him. The BBC changed their mind, but my publishers wanted to publish the poems as a unit. And this is how *Requiem* was born in 1996. Some years later, John Carpenter, who was then a graduate student in Shakespeare studies, came to talk to me about music. He had played for years with a really good reggae/ska/rock-steady outfit in Miami. He said he was a guitarist and wanted to jam with me one day since he had heard I played in a reggae band. At the time, my band Ujamaa had just had a reunion and we were realizing a live CD to commemorate things, and so I gave the CD to John along with some demo material. We met to jam and he talked a lot about the work. He said he would love to collaborate with me. So I gave him *Requiem* on a whim, and told him to see what he could come up with. When I heard what he had done, I was really impressed. Moved, even. I knew we had to perform it somewhere. And we worked together to turn it into a performance which was staged at the Columbia Museum of Art. Tom Feelings was generous enough to allow us to project images from the book as I read and we performed. *Requiem* was performed with a small trio of musicians and myself.

SASSY: Tell us about your process. How have some of your other collaborative projects come about? Did you find someone's photographs/paintings/music that you enjoyed and then approached them? Did you begin writing first and then shared the idea, or are there some ideas that were themselves collaborations?

DAWES: Typically, the process begins with the writing. But that is only a part of the story. The truth is that each project comes through a different path. Sometimes I am commissioned to respond with poetry to some already existing art. This happened when I wrote the poems for *Bruised Totems*, which is based on the famous Bareiss Collection of African Art. There, one could call this a passive collaboration. I was not working directly with the

artists who created these works as they were all long dead. But a dialogue between art forms was taking place. Some years ago the Columbia Museum of Art had an exhibit of Urhobo artwork from the Urhobo tribe in Nigeria. They invited me to respond to the artwork. I did. While doing so I discovered that this tribe was one that my grandfather lived among when he served as a missionary in Nigeria for almost two decades at the turn of the 20th century. It was a wonderful connection to make and to write poems about. The performance of these poems was then organized with a local jazz musician who improvised as I performed the poems. We rehearsed briefly and pointed to mood signatures and cues, and then simply improvised in our performance--song, poetry and the keyboard and saxophone. It was a strong performance and a deeply collaborative one--at least in terms of the performance of music and poetry. *Wisteria* worked in a different way. Much like *Requiem*, it began with the poems, but the poems were based on interviews I conducted with African American women in Sumter. I then gave the poems to a musician and composer, Kevin Simmonds, who set the pieces to music. We then worked together to design the full production of voice, song, and instrumentation. The inclusion of the photographs by Robert Johnson came afterwards. This was an idea that Kevin Simmonds had and that completed the collaborative process on one level. Kevin Simmonds worked with his musicians in a collaborative manner and I did the same with some of the readers/singers. The work has continued to grow in this way. *Brimming*, another collaborative work, began as a commissioned piece. My task was to respond to an exhibition of the art of Brian Rutenberg, a New York based South Carolinian painter. I wrote a series of poems after viewing his work and reading about his process and his biography. The performance of the poems was then done as a staged work with dancers and a cellist. I directed the piece and did not read in the production. *Brimming* has had several performances. The artwork of Rutenberg is emblazoned on a screen as the poems are read. These are all collaborative efforts that come from different places, but they can be far more integrated in their collaborative process. I suspect that this will happen.

SASSY: Is the writing itself ever collaborative or is it the performance of the writing?

DAWES: My writing is often collaborative but I have not yet published or performed work that has been done collaboratively. And here I mean poetry. I have always regarded the work I have done with musicians (during my years in the band) and with theatre folks (during my years in theatre) as collaborative even in the writing. Often I am relied upon to generate text, but once the staging or rehearsing begins, I am constantly looking for help with language, with the form and with the structure of the work. In these collaborative arrangements, I find that there has to be some clear line about what roles each person has. My other more collaborative writing exercises have included multiple Renga writing projects with writers from all over. Often I treat the Renga as an opportunity to mentor newer writers, and also as a chance to be in dialogue with my peers. These are pure collaborations that generate rich work. I think I have completed almost a hundred of these over time. I have also worked closely with an Indian poet, Sudeep Sen, on a series of "letter-poems" between us which have appeared in

various places separately but which we intend to publish as a joint text at some point. Here the dialogue is not unlike the renga, but does evolve through conversations that take place outside the writing. Nonetheless, we remain inscribed in the idea of the writer as essentially working in isolation.

SASSY: For the collaborations that have been performed, how have they been received and what do you account for that reception? Has there been any challenges in staging any particular performance?

DAWES: In terms of reception I can say that these collaborations have always been well received. Indeed, these performances have often been described by folks attending as some of the most moving poetry performances they have attended. No doubt, much of this is because of the way in which these performances touch on the senses--the music and the visual images can add to the experience significantly. I have had a few people express the wish that the music could be lowered in some sequences. But it is quite uniform that these performances have tended to be stellar ones and ones that have been well received. I say this without arrogance, as I am acutely aware of the fact that much of what makes these performances work so well is the skill and creative power of the people I have collaborated with. The greatest challenge of performances of this nature is the cost to mount them. Usually the team is a large one and it does cost money to house and transport so many people. Tom Feelings was present for the first showing of *Requiem* and he was deeply moved by it and pleased. *Wisteria* was performed before the family of many of the women who were subjects in the piece and in front of the few surviving women and they too were touched and appreciative of the work. I was nervous about that one. Brian Rutenberg has read the poems based on his art and has expressed pleasure at the work. These poems along with his art are collected in a chapbook called *Brimming*. He granted us permission to use the work. I mention these responses because I think that the great concern about projects like this might well be a feeling that somehow the art is being compromised by the poetry or the music. I have not seen that kind of response. Indeed, Tom Feelings would later give me some two hundred of his illustrations of children and ask me to write poems in response to those pieces. The result of that collaboration was the book, *I Saw Your Face*. Feelings designed the book after selecting one of the poems I had written as the basis for the book.

SASSY: You've certainly already touched upon this, Kwame, but I'd like to ask the question nonetheless. In addition to your interest in theatre why are you particularly interested in collaboration? How does collaboration push the possibilities of both your own art and that to which you are responding?

DAWES: I think that the collaborative process begins long before the thought of performance comes up. I tend to respond well to the work of others, especially visual arts. But I also respond to poetry by others and fiction by others. I am working on a massive project that is based on the work of a playwright. The poems are not retellings of the plays, but are encounters with the poetic possibilities in the plays. The poems, then, are lyrical and are rooted

in my sensibility, but they have been pushed forward and fired by the plays. I have written poems that respond to music, to art, to other narratives and these are all part of the process of stirring the creative instincts. So in many ways, the initial creative impetus is decidedly rooted in the desire to write poems, to tell stories or capture moments through the process of language. There is then a secondary impulse related to the movement towards performance, which comes from the pleasure of watching others create, and create in response to my work. Often, these responses, especially when they are musical, tend to help me reshape my work and to see them work in quite different and often helpful ways. I have changed lines in poems and cut out lines of other poems in response to what I have seen a musician do with the poem. I relish that kind of dialogue. Finally, because I know that music has such a powerful impact on me, I like to share the full force of a poem--its inspiration and shaping--with readers and listeners, and that is part of what draws me to the collaborative act.

SASSY: Tell us about your latest project?

DAWES: The new project is called *Hope*. Like the other projects, *Hope* has grown out of a commission. I was invited by the Virginia Quarterly review to write a full-length article on HIV/AIDS in Jamaica. I mentioned that I would be interested in writing poems as a way of processing the experience of meeting with and talking to people in Jamaica who are living with HIV/AIDS. So for several months I wrote poems. The project was funded and produced in partnership with the Pulitzer Center for Crisis Reporting--a media outfit in DC. They became quite interested in the poems, feeling that they could use the poetry as the basis for an elaborate and sophisticated web treatment of the HIV/AIDS reporting I was doing. Soon, our discussions began to revolve about the ways to really "present" these poems, and I suggested that working with a composer might be a good way to go, which could eventually lead to some kind of performance. This is how Kevin Simmonds was pulled into the project. He set the poems to music and designed a performance. At the same time, still photographers and web-designers started to work with the poems to begin a series of images around the issue in Jamaica. The final performance will take place on the website and on stage. The images, the songs, the poems will all feed into the final production which is fairly advanced. The music has been recorded. The same team that put together and performed *Wisteria* is performing in this piece. *Hope* will be staged in Jamaica, in Mexico, and in various parts of the US. Again, these are collaborations with rich possibilities.

SASSY: How did this go from a commission to write a 10,000 word essay to the interactive website, LiveHopeLove.com?

DAWES: The Pulitzer Center for Crisis Reporting joined with the VQR to talk about ways to expand the project and I was invited to DC a few times to plot this. The interactive website is part of the work they do and they have done similar work on Haiti and on other issues in different parts of the world. This was their most ambitious and the first to involve poetry and music and so on. And the idea to incorporate music came from a suggestion I gave them to look at *Wisteria*. They liked it a lot and wanted to have the treatment, so Kevin Simmonds was

commissioned. I have been deeply involved in the project all the way through and they have checked me for approval and for more text and so on. I wrote all of the text on the site. They have been good about that. I wrote a lot of words. Over forty thousand words of prose, along with the poetry and this has been the source. I still find it inadequate. Sometimes I don't even feel as if the poems have done what they should do, but I always feel that way.

SASSY: I know that you've alluded to some of the challenges of realizing this project, including the hang-ups of the team that you were working with, particularly their assumptions about the Caribbean and about poverty, but did you have any personal concerns that you had to grapple with dealing with such a sensitive subject matter?

DAWES: I did quarrel with the crew, and we did go back and forth about some things, but I have to say that they were open and very generous and ultimately, understood what I was dealing with and what I was trying to communicate. I also struggled with my personal concerns about HIV/AIDS--the fear of the disease--not in that paranoia sense of getting it from touching someone or anything like that, but its implications to my life. I was hearing stories that were frightening for their ordinariness. And this is part of what feeds the poems. I was emotionally drained after each trip, listening to hours and hours of stories of struggle and resilience and hope. I was. What is in the site and in the articles is such a small fraction of what was experienced and heard and the hundreds of hours spent working on this thing. So that was a strain. It was all worth it, though, and I was moved by the openness of the folks who were willing to talk to me.

SASSY: Have you shared the project with the people whose stories and portraits are included on the website?

DAWES: Not yet. This was an issue for me. I did promise a few people that if I used their words and quoted them directly, I would let them see the context in which that was done before it was published. As it happens, no one quoted fell into that category. I promised everyone that there would be an event in Kingston in April for the Jamaican launch of the site and there people would get to see the whole thing in a safe environment. That is in the works. One of the longer poems was read at an HIV/AIDS benefit event during the Christmas by folks from the Jamaica AIDS Support for Life Office. The poem was dedicated to the key people from Portmore, and they really were moved by the poem. I was not there. The whole project had to find a balance between straight journalism and something more lyrical and personal, and I struggled to explain to the journalist in my collaborators that I wanted greater sensitivity to the lives of the people in the "story." I think the message came across. And that means a lot to me.