
ALL JOURNEYS LEAD HOME

The Saga of Gilgamesh and the Progress of a Reluctant Actor

by Franklin Ojeda Smith

I. Gilgamesh: the Play

Gilgamesh is the saga of a journey across the rifts of life. It's the story of King Gilgamesh's search for significance, which he discovers in brotherly friendship and communal benevolence. Early on in the drama, we learn that Gilgamesh is dutiful and persistent as the enforcer of "taxes" in his kingdom, Uruk. One character, called the Traveler, remarks upon this arrangement: "Gilgamesh is our King. He was born part god, and we were born to pay tribute."¹ King Gilgamesh also has a limitless appetite for carnal pleasure. Again, the Traveler comments: "In Uruk, I found a virgin sworn to be my bride, awaiting my touch. But I know Gilgamesh will be the first to knock upon the chamber door."² "Wealth and lust" are the fulcrums of Gilgamesh's life until he's confronted, challenged, and awakened to his shortcomings by Enkidu, a man who grew up among the animals but leaves the forest to challenge Gilgamesh. In the end, Gilgamesh and Enkidu form a deep friendship and shared purpose.

They journey in pursuit of the dreaded Humbaba, whose character represents to me the illusions and delusions in life, both internal and external—the inhibitors that distract us from and lock us out of birth and spiritual purposes. The Mighty Humbaba warns, "So, Gilgamesh and Enkidu, you wish to die by calling my name? How can you kill me when you cannot even see me? I can go inside your heart and turn your knees to mud. I can make you bark like a dog at his master's gate."³ But in the end Gilgamesh and Enkidu prove that Humbaba is "only a roar among the night trees."⁴

Gilgamesh also discovers that triumph comes at a great price for, as a result of the battle, he suffers an almost crippling loss. At the end of Act I he is full of anguish and sorrow. Almost consumed by his pain, he sets off seeking to regain all he has lost, to recapture the power of life, and, if possible, to overcome death. In his search, Gilgamesh laments to Siduri (the alluring barmaid) at the "brink" of the world, which he must summon the will to venture beyond. To do this he must overcome Siduri's carnal and emotional allure. He does so by breaking into the world beyond, wading into the unknown, enduring unimaginable physical challenges, and encountering the "Noah-like" sage Utnapishtam.

At the end of his quest, the finality of death remains undisturbed, but we discover that the journey has nurtured Gilgamesh and connected him to compassionate communal purposes. Returning to Uruk, his city, he issues a command to "Open the prisons. Take rations to the poor."⁵

II. *The Playwright: Komunyakaa*

This modern adaptation of the ancient epic of Gilgamesh was written by Yusef Komunyakaa along with Chad Gracia. As Komunyakaa and Gracia prepared to present the play to an audience that included potential producers and agents, I was invited to join the small troupe of actors who were assembled to give a dramatic reading of the work. On the day of the performance, as I and others gathered for a rehearsal that would be followed by the actual reading, Komunyakaa suddenly appeared in the studio; at a distance I saw a man who was unassuming and almost shy in manner. By his looks, Komunyakaa, "the brother," could have been from anywhere in the Diaspora and from any circumstance. Distinguished, yes, but yet Komunyakaa might have been any middle-aged man standing on any "corner" or sitting upon any throne anywhere in the world. Or any man caged anywhere in the world. He stood there, coming out of the picture with his speckled gray headhairs attending, deepening, and crowning his ebony features. Standing there, he seemed in another dimension, apart, still yet moving, somehow here and yet not here. Are prophets ever still, ever attached?

After our rehearsal, we took directions from the director Jim Milton and from Chad Gracia, and then the ensemble took a break before the actual reading. Up close and listening to him, I felt Komunyakaa to be a man girthed by confidence and regal assurance. The feel of Komunyakaa the warrior settled upon me. He was calm and still inside, like champion boxers, or people who are deeply grounded and "purpose full." When I got the chance, I introduced myself to him and we chatted, searching out our pasts. We are from the same generation and the same South. We are college professors. Knowing that he had come from Louisiana when he did, I wanted to know how he got out, become "un-caged." He told me he got out through military service, so of course I thought Vietnam—*maybe he knew the brother I lost there or the baby brother—whom a New York Times art critic called a new genius* and who, although he came home we still "lost" over there. But, we didn't get to that particular conversation. He said that after military service there was college and so forth and so on. He told his story as a report, with little obvious emotional attachment to the different stages of his journey. He told it more like a worker wiping his brow with a shirtsleeve while standing over a hoe or between the handlebars of a plow. He spoke in a matter-of-fact voice, more under than over-toned, and I found myself listening to him intently. The way he "played" his voice didn't come to me right then—I was listening too hard—but it did later.

That night, after the reading, a group of us chatted in a restaurant nearby; while listening and watching, it hit me: Komunyakaa doesn't just speak; he "blows" his voice instrument! I sat there amazed, watching and remembering the story I'd heard about John Coltrane in the Netherlands. It seems that one night while blowing, Trane became so frustrated with his horn that he dropped it to its strap, exclaiming, "I can't get no more from this!" He then started beating his chest and vocalizing—playing the more complex and complete instrument—his voice. At the time I heard the story I thought I understood it because I was training in commercial voice-over techniques and could sense the infinite potential of the voice and appreciate the play among voice, imagery, and diaphragmatic breathing.⁶ As a matter of fact, I was so moved by

this story that it prompted me to rig up a resonance chamber, using a headphone and a preamp. Then I started practicing reading aloud with Lomax and Abdul's *300 Years of Black Poetry*.⁷

As I read this work and others, for the first time I found the drums inside words—drums that tell deeper, more penetrating, magnificent stories—to those who can hear them. I read Gullah folktales in my native dialect, and the music shook the crust from me, the drums peeled away decades of affectation.⁸ Reading Gloria Naylor took me home to the Sea Islands crying,

“Miranda kinda blooms when the evening air hits her skin. She stands for a moment watching what the last of the sunlight does to the sky down by The Sound. They say every blessing hides a curse, and every curse a blessing. And with all the aggravation belonging to a slow fall, it'll give you a sunset to stop your breath, no matter how long you been on the island [and in my case how long away]. It seems like God reached way down into his box of paints, found the purest reds, the deepest purples, and a dab of midnight blue, then just kinda trailed His fingers along the curve of the horizon and let 'em all bleed down. And when them streaks of color hit the hush-a-by green of the marsh grass with the blue of The Sound behind 'em, you ain't never had to set foot in a church to know you looking at a living prayer.”⁹

In the restaurant that night, I realized that Komunyakaa is a great word drummer—a warrior, his weapons exceedingly more profound than spear or nuclear device. As he talked, his hands were relaxed, one atop the other, centered near his chest, and his curved fingers seemed to hold a horn, and they moved up and down from his throat to his diaphragm. As he spoke, his head and face tilted off center and arched downward as if attached to his air horn. In the shadow on the wall, I no longer saw Komunyakaa but a silhouette of John Coltrane. And I felt the power of Komunyakaa the prophet blowing at my soul, arousing, resurrecting buried and beaten humanism, calling us to stand righteously entrenched. He talked and my mind sang, “*blow my brother blow, bring us to our being and to just 'be.'*”

III. Reluctant Journey

What a journey. Five years after “*The OATH*,” and here I am, a working actor sitting on a bench in a studio in the Broadway district of New York City waiting to do a stage reading. I can't tell you how anxious I am about this reading. I sit wondering how ordering 8 x 10-inch headshot envelopes could have led to this. The disbelief is not diminished by knowing the facts of the case—that when I called the supplier, Chad Gracia, to inquire if the envelopes were industry standard, he responded, “Yes, they are,” and added, “I like your voice. Are you an actor? Would you be interested in a stage reading?” Chad recalls, “My hearing your voice on my answering machine and

immediately realizing that you were the man I had been searching for. Power, presence, depth, wisdom—I felt them all after only five seconds, and thus I chose you without looking back as one of the lucky few.” I didn’t need to think about Chad’s offer, I knew enough about my acting journey to simply say YES—to just be still and let this happen. You see, I feel there is a “Supreme Hand” leading me on this journey which began when cancer ran me down a little over five years ago. Chad recounts our meeting a few days later near Broadway; he remembers “our intense tête-à-tête at the café where we hammered out the language together, Yusef’s gaze always looming above us, as fellow diners looked on with curiosity and mystification as we determined the best way to pronounce ‘Humbaba’ and ‘Utnapishtam,’ Sumerian style.”

Five years ago I lay in a hospital bed in North Philadelphia . . . dying because of my own stupidity and embarrassment, dying because being educated didn’t prevent me from being ignorant. You see, my tumor had been bleeding for years, sending me red signals that failed to force me to overcome my fear and embarrassment. So, when the bleeding got to the point where all I could do was run from one toilet bowl to the next, I was forced to start taking long, slow rides to doctors. First the colonoscopy to confirm the cancer, then tests to measure its breadth and depth, followed by trips to radiation and medical oncologists and then to the surgeon. In sum, diagnosis: colorectal cancer. Treatment: radiation combined with chemotherapy to shrink the tumor before surgery. Prognosis: Who knows?

At the beginning of the chemo regimen, I was an inpatient all week on the cancer ward being drip-fed 24/7. Throughout the week, I used my limited Spanish speaking ability to converse with a Puerto Rican man who was always on the ward because his wife was in isolation being prepared for a bone-marrow procedure. One evening he mentioned that his pastor was coming to pray outside his wife’s room and asked if I would like the pastor to pray with me afterward. I jumped at the offer. About eight or eight-thirty that evening my buddy came into my room with his pastor as well as two church women. We formed a circle, joining hands, and the pastor prayed in Spanish. I was part of the call and response choir. I tried to express my feelings, thanking everyone profusely before they left. About three hours later, as I lay in bed, I had an audience with God. You might call it an epiphany, but I insist that it was a visit with God, and God said, “Are you quiet enough now . . . will you listen now . . . will you do it now?” It had been more than 45 years since we’d had a direct conversation about it. But it had always been there, printed in whispering-ink on the back of my mind, audible whenever I was still enough to hear. I swore I would do it. I swore that if I were able, if I got through this . . . I would devote myself to acting.

About a year later, after the rounds of chemo, radiation, surgery, and a colostomy, I took that acting class and stepped into another world. I first experienced acting as a calling, back when Hemingway’s *Old Man and the Sea* was less than a decade old, and I’d just completed a run of a play based on the novel in school. That’s when I first seemed to hear God summoning me to the discipline. But I was young and willful, with baseball on my mind. As a recent Sea Island migrant living in the South Bronx of New York, I was trying to shed my “Gychee manners.” Plus, even with my confused mind and adolescent vision, giving in to my dreams of acting seemed like fool’s play and an ignoble career choice. I found it distasteful and bitter to think about matching

myself to the models of African-American entertainment success that I knew back then. Sure, I had the widow's peak forehead, but otherwise didn't look much like Belafonte, couldn't play a horn, and didn't like Armstrong's grinning, and I was running away from Pearl Bailey's "down-homisms." Back then, that's all you saw, that, Bill Bojangles, and caricatures with big, white, frightened eyes in the dark jumping out of black skin: That was the world of the "colored entertainer." That world wasn't for me. Jackie Robinson and Roy Campanella showed dignity, Jim Brown was invincible, and Big Bill Russell was the champion of champions. The openings I saw were for "ballers"—baseball, football, basketball—and that's the way I went.

I was going to play shortstop for the Dodgers. I knew I had what it took. I knew that if I could play the infield like Luis Aparicio, hit like Ernie Banks, and run like Willie Mays, I could play for the Dodgers and any other team hiring "colored." I did that—became a New York City high school star and then led the collegiate players in hitting, losing the base-stealing title by just one base. What I couldn't overcome nor accept was the "colored pay scale." I thought I should earn a bonus and salary based on what I did and not on my color. But the world of baseball lived inside a society with an invisible formula that said otherwise. Remember that this is before the "transformation," before free agency in baseball, before my former New York high school basketball teammates at Texas Western defeated coach Adolph Rupp and his Kentucky Wildcats, and in doing so slapped apartheid on national television. The strange mixture of victories, racial duplicity, frustrations, and the current of the times gradually transformed me, until in college I changed my priorities and played baseball so I could be in academia. The Vietnam conflict was raging; my age cohorts had the choice of being in college or at war. The dichotomy in choice was again "color coded." Again, I went against the code by going to and staying in college. By the time the war was over I had finished with graduate school and could teach. Married with a family, I became an assistant professor, and the whispering need to act was hushed. I shooed it away for almost an entire career as a sociologist, until cancer brought me my audience with God.

IV. Acting

After my treatment, I kept the oath I had made, and, as soon as I was able, I took that acting class and was on a fast-track learning curve. As is consistent with my predilection and training, I immersed myself in reading and study, figuring intensity would get me there quicker—wherever "there" was. I read the masters and their theories, biographies, critiques of great works. As an undergraduate psychology major, I of course had had an intense exposure to Sigmund Freud, but now, reading in this discipline, I found bridges between many of Freud's postulates and those of the acting master Constantin Stanislavski and his "method training." Like neo-Freudians, method-acting proponents and opponents sprung forth from my reading like branches from an ancient tree.¹⁰ And though they may vehemently argue the contrary, my reading and my classes have taught me that both method-acting advocates and

detractors circle the same barn—urging and espousing realism/naturalism as foundational to good craftsmanship.

And yet there can be a huge void between knowing the need to be natural and being natural. In classes we hear all the time from our coaches, “Get out of your head! DO!” Like swinging at balls, reading the putting greens, shooting jump shots, gardening, or showing love, acting is more about doing than thinking and comes more naturally through practice and experience: “Speak the speech, I pray you, as I pronounced it to you, trippingly on the tongue.”¹¹ An exemplar of *being* through *doing*, the late great actress Beah Richards believed that through the craft we each have a unique contribution to make to humanity and should take every opportunity to make it.¹²

V. The Actors

So this, this evening of the reading of *Gilgamesh*, to which Chad Gracia has invited me to contribute, I sit outside the studio, waiting for the performance to begin. My fellow actors are standing in a group at my right. They all seem to know each other. I’m the outsider. They’re engrossed in conversation about people, places, and achievements, some of which I know about, but most of which I do not, and at the moment care little about. I may have entered the acting world at a later age, but I have entered not without experience—experience that tells me to save my energy for the performance, which is after all the bottom line. I’ll chat afterward. . . . I know too that actors, like athletes, have individual, collective, and very specific getting-ready rituals—some pop words like an opiate, chatting incessantly until muscle fatigue quiets the nerves; others cover themselves in braggadocio as if in combat ribbons, medals or war paint that hide insecurity. Some of us lean more to solitude and quiet. The group at my shoulder reminds me of my experience in pregame huddles—huddles in which we profess our trust in one another and lift up the weak and the hero alike. I look and listen to the flow of the conversation within the huddle; their talk moves as if they were already an ensemble on stage rather than a casual group chatting in the hallway. Each player takes a turn talking while the others wait patiently without interrupting; there’s no cutting each other off in mid-monologue. The sociologist in me observes that these actors are, by manner and style, stage performers. Some of them have a theatrical flair to their dress and a general ethos that signals that they are entrenched stage actors, well seasoned. By appearance, though of course not by experience, I was among the older actors in the group. Every so often, someone in the group would feel me looking and glance my way. I’d offer a slight nod—trying to chisel against my perceived exogenism—and he or she would quickly turn, again picking up again the flow of the dialogue. After one such glance-and-nod, I thought about Jackie Robinson’s first day at spring training after signing with the Dodgers, and wondered if anyone was going to throw the ball my way or play catch with me this evening. But I also knew that after an honest performance there’d be no circles amongst us.

I smile confidently in my mind, thinking how over decades of similar situations I have played the “Buh Rabbit” role pleading with “Buh Wolf” not to throw me in the

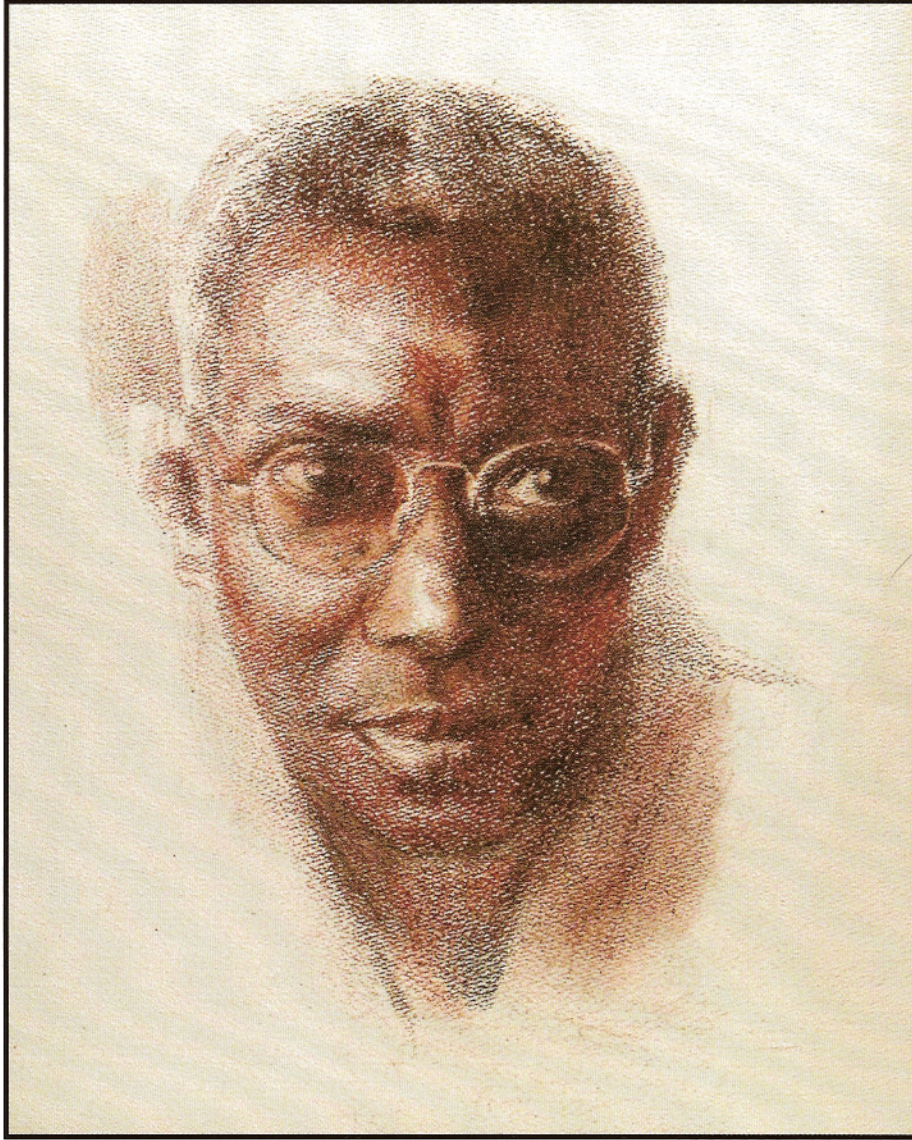
briar patch—how under the smell of Jim Crowism my generation was taught, “you gotta be better just to be equal, two steps forward to gain one”—and how I had modified that message for my children . . . “if the competition is close you lost,” I told them like a scratched record. The names and lives of Paul Robeson and Canada Lee flashed into mind—as a reminder of dues paid and wheels made. I think about the gifted teachers, “the angels” God has sent to bless me, who, when I am quiet enough to hear and blind enough to see, show me again and again how to stand when challenged.^{13, 14}

Well, Chad is calling us in; the real show begins, and I’m bringing with me a lifetime of tools, some lost and recaptured, some newly found, all honed by agony, joy, fear, a rainbow of emotions and the pounding of time: “I’m batting clean-up y’all,” putting on my best James Earl God Voice. “Look out Yogi, I ain’t bunting and when I get on I’m running.”

NOTES

1. *Gilgamesh*, Act 1, Scene 5, p. 15.
2. *Ibid*, Scene 5, p. 16.
3. *Ibid*, Scene 10, p. 34.
4. *Ibid*, Scene 10, p. 36.
5. *Ibid*, Scene 10, p. 66.
6. Kristen Linklater, *Freeing the Natural Voice* (New York: Drama Publishers, 1976); Cicely Berry, *Voice and the Actor* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1973).
7. Alan Lomax and Raoul Abdul, eds. *300 Years of Black Poetry* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1970).
8. Charles C. Jones, *Negro Myths from the Georgia Coast Told in the Vernacular* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1888; reissued Detroit: Singing Tree, 1969). Citations are to the Singing Tree edition.
9. Gloria Naylor, *Mama Day* (New York: Ticknor & Fields, 1988).
10. Constantin Stanislavski, *An Actor Prepares* (New York: Theatre Arts, 1936); *Building a Character* (New York: Theater Arts, 1949); Richard Boleslavsky, *Acting, The First Six Lessons* (New York: Theatre Arts, 1933); Lee Strasberg, *A Dream of Passion* (Boston: Little Brown, 1987); Sanford Meisner, *Meisner on Acting* (New York: Vintage, 1987); Stella Adler, *The Art of Acting* (New York: Applause Books, 2000); Howard Clurman, *The Fervent Years: The Group Theatre and the Thirties* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1975); Robert Lewis, *Advice to the Players* (New York: Theatre Communication Group, 1980); David Mamet, *True and False: Heresy and Common Sense for the Actor* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1997); Howard Guskin, *How to Stop Acting* (New York: Faber and Faber, 2003); Eric Morris and Joan Hotchkis, *No Acting Please* (Los Angeles: Whitehouse/Spelling, 1977).
11. Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, Act III, Scene 2.
12. *Beah: A Black Woman Speaks*, Clinica Estetico and Lisa Gay Inc. in association with HBO; biography of actress, poet, and teacher Beah Richards, 2005.
13. Mona Z. Smith, *Becoming Something: The Story of Canada Lee* (New York: Faber & Faber, 2004).
14. Franklin O. Smith, “Gullah Narratives,” *Anthropology and Humanism Quarterly*. 16.4 (Fall 1991) 129–136.

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A Pastel Portrait of Komunyakaa
by Sam Feinstein

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