

Suddenly Suzan

Suzan-Lori Parks has a new play, a first novel and a musical on the way. So why is she singing the blues?

PHOTO BY JULIANA SOHN

It's not yet noon, but playwright Suzan-Lori Parks has already put in nearly eight hours of writing, typical of a "good day," when she crawls out of bed at 4 a.m. to fire up her Apple G4 Titanium PowerBook. The punishing schedule has certainly paid off. Over the past several years, Parks, 39, has conquered a variety and volume of projects that most writers won't put their hands to in an entire career.

Her 15th full-length play, a brutally imagined, emphatically loose adaptation of Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* with the catchy title *F---ing A*, opens this month at New York's Public Theater. It's her risky follow-up to 2001's unlikely Broadway hit *Topdog/Underdog*, a kinetic, highly symbolic two-character drama about rival black brothers named Lincoln and Booth.

In much of her work, Parks has juxtaposed icons and historical figures with harsh contemporary settings, illuminating the bleaker aspects of the black experience with profound literary flair. Although *Topdog* is her most linear and humorous play, the appearance of such an idiosyncratic, uncompromising voice on Broadway—an arena not known for taking creative chances—was nothing short of extraordinary. And that was before she became the first African-American woman to win a Pulitzer Prize for drama, in 2002.

Marking a bold return to the avant-garde, *F---ing A* is a dark tale of a vengeful abortionist named Hester who toils away in the hopes of buying the freedom of her incarcerated son. (This is the playwright's second go-round with Hawthorne's classic—her first, 1999's *In the Blood*, centered on another Hester, a homeless black mother of five, and garnered Parks a Pulitzer nomination.)

Parks, who lives in a rented apartment in Venice Beach, keeps the Tiffany paperweight that the Pulitzer committee sent her on the bookshelf, still wrapped in its distinctive robin's-egg-blue box. "So when you look at it, you don't really think, Pulitzer Prize," explains Parks. "You think, Tiffany box."

In the next room, her husband of almost two years, blues musician Paul Osher, 51, blows a soulful riff on the harmonica (he used to play with Muddy Waters). When she won her Pulitzer, he gave her a rare 1937 National guitar and is now teaching her to play. Parks hopes to begin singing the blues at open-mike nights this year. "I'm terrified," she says, "but it's something I'd really like to do."

Where she'll find the time is anyone's guess. In 2000 the California Institute of the Arts wooed Parks from Brooklyn to the West Coast to create a playwriting program and teach. In the meantime, Disney drafted her to write the book for a stage musical about the Harlem Globetrotters called *Hoopz*, and Oprah Winfrey's film company commissioned her to adapt Toni Morrison's 1998 novel, *Paradise*. (Her first screenplay was for Spike Lee's 1996 phone-sex comedy, *Girl 6*.) The day before *Topdog* opened on Broadway, Parks finished her debut novel, *Getting Mother's Body*, a finely observed road-trip tale set in 1963 that follows a pregnant teenage Texan who aims to unearth a heap of jewels from the coffin of her dead mother. Random House will publish the book in May.

Clearly, Parks possesses an omnivorous creative appetite—and the drive to pull it all off. "She has astonishing discipline," confirms *Topdog* director George C. Wolfe. "I remember one point when the show was in previews, I went backstage, and she was writing on her laptop, working on a new project. She wasn't even luxuriating in what was happening in terms of our show. She

was on to the next piece."

"I get my validation from writing," says Parks, who was the recipient of a \$500,000 MacArthur "genius" grant in 2001. Still, despite her successes, a nagging worry persists. "I'm afraid of not being any good at what I do," she confides. "But you have to overcome that fear and accept the fact that some days, you're not any good. And *F---ing A* was not any good for six years."

Over the years, she nearly gave up on the play on numerous occasions, but the story had a hold on her, which she describes in her own unique manner, a mix of

Parks at her home in Brooklyn



Parks' new play attacked her like a rabid dog, and writing it was "the only way to survive."

bubbling enthusiasm and "wow, man" cool: "It was like a dog leapt out of a tree when you're walking through the forest and attached itself to your back and won't get off. That was how it attached itself to me. You can't shake it loose, and it starts to bite you, and it has rabies, and you think you're going to die, and the only way to survive is to get rid of it by writing it."

At times like this, Parks' words—raw, unsettling, evocative—are not unlike those employed by her stage characters. "Her language is very poetic without being flowery," says rapper-actor Mos Def, who made his stage debut in *Topdog* and will also star in *F---ing A*. "Suzan is able to say things of great depth in her writing without using up a whole lot of words. She reminds me of Malcolm X—she makes it plain."

And to hear her tell it, she keeps her downtime rather plain, as well. When pressed to reveal a guilty pleasure, all she can come up with is...reading.

Well, there is one other thing. "I think I'm into true transgressive behavior," she says with a grin, "like putting a play about two black men on Broadway." She laughs. "I guess I'm into that kind of s---." —ERIK JACKSON