



Greta Oglesby (G. K. Marche)

# How To Catch Creation

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## West Coast Premiere

Christina Anderson  
Directed by Nataki Garrett

Notes by Dawn Monique Williams

## Who's Who

**Griffin:** Out of prison a year after serving 25 years on a wrongful conviction. While locked up, Griffin became a self-professed Black feminist and now lectures on the failings of the legal system, gender, race and economic inequality. He is grieving the loss of his mother and desperately seeking to parent a child. Griffin and Tami, both in their later 40s, have been friends since they were young adults.

**Tami:** An artist and Griffin's friend of 25 years, she sent him books while he was in prison, contributing to his enlighten-

ment. Tami, a lesbian, is recovering from a past heartbreak and an inability to paint new works. Until she befriends Riley, who inspires her to return to the canvas, she is suffering from a block.

**Riley:** A bisexual in her early 20s, Riley is a computer scientist. She is deeply committed to Stokes, her boyfriend of four years, and frustrated by his sudden disinterest in painting. Perhaps it is too reminiscent of the way in which she abandoned electronic music in favor of the acceptability, and income, of the tech industry.

**Stokes:** A painter turned novelist following rejection from 13 art schools and being introduced to the writings of G. K. Marche. Stokes is in his late 20s, living with his girlfriend Riley in San Francisco and working part-time at an art gallery.

**G. K. Marche:** An author whom Griffin and Stokes share an interest in and casually

bond over. Her own story, with her lover Natalie, unfolds in a series of flashbacks set in the Tenderloin neighborhood of San Francisco in the late 1960s.

**Natalie:** G. K. Marche's partner. A seamstress and clothing designer who found it impossible to compete with Marche's devotion to the typewriter.

## The Story

It's 2014. Griffin, out of prison just over a year, is contemplating raising a child. Tami, director of a conservatory painting program, hasn't painted since her last relationship ended. Riley has a thriving tech career but hasn't made a fresh beat in who knows how long. Stokes, rejected from 13 art schools, decides he's actually a novelist. These four lives intersect and collide in the most unpredictable of ways while the years 1966 and '67 run a parallel course in a series of fast-paced, intercut scenes. In that storyline, G. K. Marche, living in San Francisco's Tenderloin, writes her latest novel and navigates the shifting dynamic in her romantic relationship with Natalie.

Griffin, wrongfully convicted, served 25 years before his conviction was overturned. While in prison, his mother and his best friend Tami exposed him to Black feminist literature, and the works of G. K. Marche in particular. When we meet Stokes, he's just made an impulse buy and is in possession of a box of used Marche books. A coincidental lunchtime meeting brings these two men together in friendship over a shared love of Marche's work while we watch Marche's own relationship compete with the success of her writing career.

Riley, Stokes's girlfriend of four years, meets Tami when looking for answers about why Stokes wasn't admitted to art school. The women find themselves relying on one another to get beyond their artistic blocks, and in doing so they cross boundaries and consider what lives they really want to be living. These six characters make contact, retreat and weave themselves through one another's lives with longing, passion, joy, heartbreak and despair. Each pursuing that titular question of "how to catch creation."

## Genesis of *Creation*

**W**hile Christina Anderson was playwright in residence at Magic Theatre, briefly living in Oakland before moving to San Francisco, she was inspired by the range of progressive, and often queer, Black artists residing there. “I was meeting a lot of different types of Black folks that I hadn’t necessarily met before because I grew up in Kansas. It was just a different culture out there in the Bay Area. I was meeting so many Black intellectuals in Oakland—specifically, the kind of Black people who were reading all types of different material, and I was meeting Black men who identified as feminists,” Anderson shared in an interview.

This lasting influence of the time she spent in and around San Francisco is the genesis of *How to Catch Creation*, which began its life as a commission from American Conservatory Theatre.

As a hallmark of her work, Anderson plays with geography, offering audiences something that is both familiar and unrecognizable in cities, landscapes and locales. Her body of work includes *Good Goods*, *Inked Baby*, *pen/man/ship*, *Blacktop Sky*, *The Ashes Under Gait City*, *Hollow Roots*, *Man in Love* and *Drip*, with settings varying from “a small, unknown city/country/town/village that doesn’t appear on any map” to the fictitious Gait City, Oregon, to the open sea, to San Francisco’s Tenderloin.

Driven by research, Anderson is asking a big question or responding to something she feels passionate about with each play: “Thinking small is impossible for me. Writing small is impossible for me.” She builds from there, considering how a piece can live onstage. Thematically, Anderson’s canon deals heavily in race, class and gender, with a primary focus on Black American stories. With a hunger for information-gathering, she writes with a spirit of curiosity.

Anderson, who discovered playwrighting at age 15, believes that plays should be a dance. “They should be choreography, a painting that slowly starts to develop itself.” Interested in music and language,



Christina Anderson (playwright)

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her sense of theatricality has been noted by critics. *How to Catch Creation* sits nicely in Anderson’s oeuvre, revealing that she is questioning legacy, parenthood, conception, possession, transformation and time. *Creation*, as many of her plays, is told in layered time with the past and present bleeding into one another. While Anderson’s plays are structured cinematically, each a series of rapid short scenes that tend to frequently shift between multiple locations, she is cognizant of how

space affects storytelling. She is always considering how each piece can necessarily only live on the stage; if it can stand alone on the page, relying only on the dramatic imagination with no need of embodiment; or if it could just as easily be a film. She asks herself, “What makes this a play?” Anderson believes that theatre is a “powerful thing where adults are still willing to pretend . . . We can have someone holding a toy boat and we can agree that he’s on a real boat.” She is far more invested in the possibilities of a space than its limitations.

Another limitation Anderson frees herself from is the white gaze. She is not interested in telling stories through the lens of the status quo. People perhaps make assumptions about Anderson’s work based on her theatrical lineage of Black women playwrights, as she’s been told “I don’t want to see another *For Colored Girls*” and “I don’t want a Black person yelling at me about how bad of a white person I am,” demonstrating that the thinking and understanding around what Black theatre can be is often limited. Her response has been: “I have an all-Black cast and you think it’s just going to be about yelling at *you*?” Anderson is concerned with illuminating Black lives, which in most cases has nothing or very little to do with yelling at white people. She is centering women, Black women, queer Black women, and allowing these characters

to exist without opposition to, and in many cases regard for, whiteness.

In *Creation*, characters do not declare their race or sexuality; they move through time and space as people with sexual appetites, belief systems, values, misdeeds, loss and longing. They are not othered or marginalized; rather, they are complex and varied with great allowances for subtlety, nuance and contradiction. Anderson puts the words “a singular voice that explores the revolutionary act of Black intimacy in a climate of Black rage” into the mouth of the character Riley as a descriptor of G. K. Marche. This sentiment, however, could be stated in praise of Anderson herself as she unapologetically explores the intimacy and dynamics at the core of human relationships.

Oftentimes as the only Black playwright programmed in a theatre’s season, as is the case with *Creation* at OSF in 2019, Anderson feels the pressure of being a single voice expected to represent a multitude of thoughts, actions and feelings. She warns against the practice of expecting any one writer to speak for a whole group. “We’re kind of put in these positions where we have to speak for the majority. I think the more you can see all of us in the same space, and the more you can hear all of us speak, people will see there’s a difference,” she says. “We’re doing different things and using theatre in different ways and significant ways.”

Anderson understands her work is politicized, but her focus is on the micro, not the macro, as she sits down to write. “I just try to write good characters and think about the choices they’d make in the circumstances they’re in. I just want to write a good character and a good story”—an impulse that must come from the exposure to geniuses of word craft and performance early on.

As she developed her own craft, Anderson was a student of Paula Vogel and credits Vogel (who wrote another 2019 OSF play, *Indecent*) with encouraging her to embrace lots of language and gifting her a sense of theatricality. Other playwrights Anderson admires include María Irene Fornés, who also used language in a dynamic, violent way that impacted Anderson; Harold

Pinter, who taught her about silence and how to use it in a very active way; and Sarah Ruhl, her first playwrighting teacher, whose sense of mystery she has inherited.

Yet, even before that exposure, Anderson was influenced by poets and spoken-word artists. She shares that she “was really interested in how language sounds.” Poets like Nikki Giovanni and Sonia Sanchez were major sources of inspiration for her. According to Anderson, they were “two women who placed language on the page, but seeing Sonia Sanchez perform was absolute magic, and how she uses

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language is fantastic.” Exposed to musicals and being of a hip-hop generation, Anderson was somehow always amidst heightened language, always steeped in rhythm, and naturally adopted those skills. “I’ll throw in alliterations, rhymes, play with onomatopoeia, people speaking over each other.... Language is one of our biggest resources, so why not have fun with it?”

Anderson has developed her own voice, to be sure. Writing characters with their own idiosyncrasies, Anderson orchestrates her plays using the page as a canvas. She uses the symbol =.=, which she calls chicken feet, to denote active silence. “It represents unspoken moments filled with energy. It can be a moment when someone decides to do (or not do), speak (or not speak).”

In her *Creation* author’s note, Anderson also writes that “the pace is swift, effortless . . . the humor is alive and well . . . so is the loneliness. There’s a sometimes desperate loneliness.” Anderson creates these characters with such clarity and deftly builds this multidimensional world where time and space collide.

## The longevity of Blackness

“I feel Black women, specifically, have a history of being erased in terms of their literary contributions in America’s literature. In a lot of ways that’s true for women of color in general, so I think the most important part is to keep these women’s voices alive and active and circulating, which is how I created the character of G. K. Marche.”

—Christina Anderson

The fictitious G. K. Marche is an amalgamation and symbolic of several women who inspired Christina Anderson as she wrote *How to Catch Creation*. Anderson says the “play is a testament to Black women artists. It’s a testament to Black women’s legacies, and literature, and writing,” and with it, she celebrates the resilience and longevity of Blackness. Marche embodies the spirit, politic and vitality of Black women writers from the ’60s and ’70s. Anderson brings Marche to the present through the Black men in the play, who have no shame in being drawn to her work; one goes as far as to declare himself a Black feminist.

Black feminism is a social-political movement asserting that sexism, gender identity, racism and class oppression are inseparably linked. Intersectionality is the key tenet of Black feminism. The movement gained traction in the 1970s as an outgrowth of concentrated civil rights actions that left Black women feeling sidelined and excluded. The book *Ain’t I a Woman*, by bell hooks, which borrows its title from the legendary 1851 Sojourner Truth speech, became something of a Black feminist manifesto, while Alice Walker coined the term *womanist* as a way of synthesizing her views on Black women in the feminist movement. These activists, authors and cultural critics, along with Angela Davis and Audre Lorde, are a few of the women who were amplifying Black feminism or womanist views during the 1970s. Black feminism, perhaps without the label, can be dated at least as far back as that Truth speech of 1851.

Anderson encountered these voices and more in her research. She was particularly drawn to the women she was learning of for the first time. She shares, “I discovered this essay by Myisha Priest called ‘Salvation Is the Issue.’ . . . She talks about multiple Black women intellectual and



## Harlem of the West

San Francisco, and its surrounding areas, is the regional setting of *How to Catch Creation*. Dating back to the California Gold Rush, San Francisco was a beacon of hope, wealth and upward mobility for Blacks, as well as immigrants and other ethnic groups. With World War II, tens of thousands of Blacks migrated up from the South to work in the shipyards. The Black population of San Francisco saw an increase of over 800 percent during the 1940s, climbing to its peak in 1970, when 13 percent of the city's population was Black.

San Francisco, in those decades, proved home to a thriving jazz culture with so many musicians and clubs that it became known as the Harlem of the West. One of the predominantly Black areas of the city, the Fillmore District, was home to venues, restaurants and shops all catering to the Black population. Most Fillmore residents worked at the Hunters Point shipyard, Hunters Point being the other area to boast of a large Black demographic (though most were living in government housing).

San Francisco's Black intellectuals and activists fed the Civil Rights Movement. In the 1960s the start of several influential organizations played a pivotal role locally: a San Francisco chapter of the Congress for Racial Equality (CORE), the Unified Freedom Movement (UFM), the Church-Labor Conference (CLC) and the Ad Hoc Committee to End Discrimination. This new generation of activists and organizations adopted the direct-action techniques of their predecessors (SF chapters of the National Urban League and the NAACP) to stage protests and demonstrations.

By the mid-1960s San Francisco's Black population was fighting for equal access to jobs, housing and education. The Hunters Point Rebellion of 1966, in particular, set in motion a series of disturbances and demonstrations throughout the city, graduating to the student



*Nataka Garrett (director, and incoming OSF artistic director)*

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literary figures who passed away at early ages . . . . It was the first time I had seen a list gathered and presented in such a way. It was really heartbreaking to think that we've lost this generation of Black women thinkers and artists." Pioneering women like playwright Lorraine Hansberry are on

this list, but also some forgotten women, some silenced women.

It is that erasure —through racism, white supremacy and patriarchy (and certainly homophobia, transphobia, ableism and other systemic biases in many cases) that troubled Anderson. She was shocked at her own ignorance of figures such as Pat Parker, a Black lesbian poet from the 1970s who died from cancer far too early. "How did I not know about Pat Parker?" Anderson discovered all of Parker's poetry, prose and dramatic writings as well as video footage of Parker performing her pieces. Her voice was one that stuck with Anderson. *Marche* was a way to reclaim Parker's voice, honor the kindling of the Black feminist movement and consider the conversation between the Black feminism of 1966 and that of 2014 (the same year three Black women founded Black Lives Matters as an

intersectional Black liberation movement). Most importantly, Anderson “wanted to have this Black, woman, literary figure who was living a joyful life in her older age” be seen and heard. The resilience. The longevity of Blackness.

Anderson names her artistic heroes as “a lot of Black female fiction writers from the '70s because they were playing with different ways of telling stories, narratives, structures and characters.” In addition to Giovanni and Sanchez, she lists Maya Angelou, Sharon Bridgforth, Lorraine Hansberry, Adrienne Kennedy, Terry McMillan, Toni Morrison and Ntozake Shange among the authors she values. Some lesbians, some writing damning lesbian tropes, but all exploring the lives and loves of Black women, all offering a place of being for Anderson, a way of understanding as a queer Black woman coming of age, and a rich literary legacy to come into. Anderson has quoted Nikki Giovanni as saying “Black love is Black wealth,” and that is something that has remained important to Anderson as she wrote *Creation*. A touchstone: What are all the facets of love that can be examined between these characters? And in one of the wealthiest cities in the world (San Francisco), with neighborhoods that rate among the poorest slums, perhaps Black love is what gets these characters over.

## Further Reading & Viewing

*Agents of Change*. Film chronicling student protests in favor of Black and ethnic studies programs and educational liberation at San Francisco State University in 1968 and Cornell in 1969.

*The New Jim Crow*, by Michelle Alexander. An indictment of the U.S. criminal justice system, in particular, the disproportionate and bias mass incarceration of Black men.

*Women, Culture & Politics*, by Angela Y. Davis. A collection of essays and speeches by Davis concerning the struggle for racial, sexual, and economic liberation and social justice.

*Sister Outsider*, by Audre Lorde. A collection of essays and speeches by Lorde concerning the racism, sexism, and homophobia faced by Black lesbians in the quest for social justice.

*The Complete Works of Pat Parker*, by Pat Parker. Includes Parker’s *Movement in Black* and a number of her other unpublished poems, a collection of prose, and plays. Parker’s work concerned itself with the Black queer female experience.

*Liliane*, by Ntozake Shange. A novel centering on a young visual artist who, through her art, expresses herself, and through her intimate relationships comes to know herself more clearly, deeply and authentically.

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strike at San Francisco State College (now San Francisco State University) in 1968. What some term the Hunters Point Riots began in response to a police officer shooting of an unarmed Black teen suspected of fleeing the officer. The rebellion/riot lasted five long, hot days and radicalized the community. Two short years later, Black students at the city’s university held a five-month strike that resolved in the creation of the nation’s first Black studies program.

## Tech Boom and Gentrification

Nearly 10,000 Black residents vacated San Francisco between 1970 and 1980, and since 1980, San Francisco’s Black population has seen a continued, steady and noticeable decline. The earliest phase of this exodus is explained by extensive and misguided city policies of eradicating “urban blight.” Thousands of homes in Black neighborhoods were razed in the name of redevelopment.

Gentrification has been another factor. The tech industry, the economic engine of San Francisco in recent years, has accelerated the decline by virtue of high-paying tech jobs with employment demographics that skew white and Asian, pricing out middle-class residents of all ethnicities. Add to that the domino effect of Black businesses closing and families relocating, many to Oakland and other cities in the East Bay.

By 2014, the jazz clubs of the Fillmore neighborhood were replaced, making way for upscale dining and shopping with landlords seeking to leverage the money from the tech boom. Landmarks like Marcus Books (one of the earliest bookstores in the nation to center Black-authored works with a focus on Black cultural and intellectual topics) closed their doors and are now footnotes in history. As these Black communities lost their cultural centers—markets, restaurants, barber-shops—they lost some spirit and vitality; they lost their foundation.