AUTUMN

BY RICHARD WESLEY

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AUTUMN had its world premiere at Crossroads Theatre Company (Marshall Jones III, Producing Artistic Director; Ricardo Khan, Co-Founder and Creative Advisor; Amie S. Bajalieh, Associate Producer) in New Brunswick, New Jersey, on April 25, 2015. It was directed by Seret Scott; the set design was by Chris Cumberbatch; the costume design was by Ali Turns; the lighting design was by Ves Weaver; the sound design was by Matt Bittner; and the production stage manager was Zoya Kachadurian. Crossroads Theatre Company also acknowledged special assistance from Woodie King, Jr. The cast was as follows:

FRANKLYN LONGLEY ..... Jerome Preston Bates
GOVERNOR ..... Terria Joseph
ZACK DRAYTON ..... Count Stovall
CALABRESE ..... Joseph Mancuso
TRICIA JOHNSON ..... Stephanie Berry
MELISSA LONGLEY ..... Kim Weston-Moran
RONALD DRAYTON ..... Michael Chenevert

Notes on *Autumn*

I began thinking about writing a play featuring black politicians almost as soon as I completed *The Talented Tenth*. By 1989, when *Tenth* was first being presented, there had been black mayors of large cities in America for close to twenty years. Ken Gibson had been elected the first black mayor of Newark, New Jersey, in 1970; Richard Hatcher of Gary, Indiana, a few years before that. And there were black mayors in Detroit, Cleveland, and Baltimore, and there had been black mayors in Los Angeles and Philadelphia as well. All of these mayors, with the exception of Tom Bradley in Los Angeles (where the black population does not have a voting majority), had succeeded in developing strong political organizations that could mobilize voters to return them to office one election cycle after another. The more effective their political organization, the greater were their chances of being reelected. My hometown of Newark, for instance, has only had four mayors from 1970 through 2014. Four black mayors across forty-four years of history. Two of them served as chief executive for thirty-five of those forty-four years. The loyalty and support provided by layers of ward chairmen represented a rise of black political power only dreamed of in previous generations. In cities where thousands of manufacturing jobs had disappeared, these municipal positions moved thousands of black people into the middle class, providing them jobs and livelihoods that had been previously closed to many of them. I leave it for others to debate the relative merits of patronage as a part of political life. There can be no denying that for hundreds of black politicians across the country, a major goal for black political empowerment in America had been achieved.

And yet…

The parade of black politicians driven from office, because of failure in their character, or by their own greed, blind ambition or cronyism, soon became dismaying. Was this what Fred Hampton died for? Was this the reward for Robert Williams's years of self-exile? What would Martin Luther King or Malcolm think now? After all of the idealism, all of the pain and sacrifice, all of the marches and years-long struggle, "Black Power" seemed reduced to a gaggle of opportunists across the country, getting theirs in the name

of the People. Hardworking, honest politicians not only saw their efforts overshadowed by the media coverage given to the failings of transgressors, but just as often found their work blunted or marginalized by the necessary compromises and horse trading that is a part of every political negotiation. Other times, black political momentum was lost and/or dissipated by fractious internecine battles initiated by various rivalries within the black community itself.

I began to wonder what had happened, what had changed in our communities and in the minds and hearts of so many black politicians. I supposed the Irish, the Italians, and the Latinos, for instance, would certainly have their own tales of disappointment to tell. Weren't *The Last Hurrah* and *All the King's Men* such cautionary tales? Why should African-American politicians be any different?

After Barack Obama became president of the United States, I became more determined than ever to write a play about urban black politics—specifically, the struggle between an old guard of black politicians who came of age during the Civil Rights struggle, cutting their teeth during the height of the Black Power movement and then riding to political power at the beginning of the post-Civil Rights era. But that was all during the final years of the twentieth century. It is now the twenty-first century, and the first generation of black politicians who were born after Civil Rights and Black Power are beginning to emerge. They are better educated, more comfortable with all the new technologies, more worldly, more ecumenical in their relationships beyond the black community, sleeker, and faster than any generation of African Americans before them. And they want their day in the sun. But what price are they willing to pay, and what price will the communities they represent be forced to pay in order for these individuals to realize their ambitions?

In the twenty-first century, the strides toward freedom continue, but the character and quality of the individuals and the construction of the vehicles to get African Americans there remain in question.

—R. W.

CHARACTERS

FRANKLYN LONGLEY
African American, male, about sixty years old.

GOVERNOR
White, female, between fifty and sixty-five years of age.

ZACK DRAYTON
African American, male, about sixty years of age.

JEFFREY CALABRESE
White, male, slightly younger than Franklyn.

TRICIA JOHNSON
African American, female, between thirty-five and forty years of age.

MELISSA LONGLEY
African American, female, a few years younger than Franklyn.

RONALD DRAYTON
African American, male, in his early to mid-forties.

AUTUMN

Scene 1

Lights up in the Governor's Mansion in the state capital. Franklyn Longley meets with the Governor.

FRANKLYN. Governor, you said you had something confidential?

GOVERNOR. It's no secret there's going to be a lot of upheaval in the party next election.

FRANKLYN. Your term as governor ends and you're running for the Senate. With you out of the statehouse everybody is nervous about where they'll be standing.

GOVERNOR. Except you're not nervous, are you?

FRANKLYN. Should I be?

GOVERNOR. I'm not going to run for the Senate, Frank.

FRANKLYN. What?

GOVERNOR. I've had enough. I want to retire from politics.

FRANKLYN. But you're the frontrunner.

The Governor smiles and shrugs.

GOVERNOR. So I'm out. Good for me, not so good for our party. We'll need a strong advocate in Washington, Frank. Our party, as well as our state.

FRANKLYN. Agreed.

GOVERNOR. Then you'd be interested?

FRANKLYN. Sitting in Congress? No.

GOVERNOR. Well, that sure as hell wasn't the answer I expected.

FRANKLYN. Governor, I run the biggest city in the state. I'm a two-time president of the National Council of Mayors. I've been wielding

power for sixteen years. Why would I give that up to be a sixty-year-old *junior senator* in Washington?

GOVERNOR. Your party needs you, Frank.

FRANKLYN. I'm happy to serve my party, but not in Washington.

GOVERNOR. I'm hoping I can persuade you.

FRANKLYN. I'd go with Bill Horan. He's been in the House three terms, people like him and he's a mainstream kind of guy.

GOVERNOR. Congressman Horan?

FRANKLYN. Bill's been waiting a long time to move up. He'd leap at the chance.

GOVERNOR. I'll keep that in mind. Something else.

FRANKLYN. Yes, Governor.

GOVERNOR. I had an interesting dinner conversation with Harold MacMannis a few nights ago.

FRANKLYN. *(Eyes narrowing.)* You did?

GOVERNOR. He told me about a pitch you made to him and the other Big Four CEOs to redevelop your central business district. They are very excited about it.

FRANKLYN. I'm glad to hear that.

GOVERNOR. I was surprised you never approached me.

FRANKLYN. Well, I still have to get a few ducks lined up. I'm surprised MacMannis brought it up. I'd asked that it be kept quiet.

GOVERNOR. Well, you know how it is: a great meal, a lot of Chardonnay, and my natural charm. Nothing stays secret for long.

Not amused, Franklyn looks away.

Now that old Harold has let the cat out of the bag, why don't you fill me in?

Franklyn hesitates.

Don't worry, Frank. This is confidential, too.

FRANKLYN. It's simple, really: I rezone the central business district so I can close down all those bargain stores, low-end retail outlets, and other marginal businesses there and move them up to Baxter Avenue in Hilltop.

GOVERNOR. Hilltop? It's the most depressed neighborhood in the city, and all the shootings and drugs there. Jesus, Frank.

FRANKLYN. The real problem is, there're no jobs. No life to the place; just an area where people exist. I can turn Baxter Avenue into a major shopping zone, and use the newly opened land downtown to lure new businesses—bigger, *better* businesses.

GOVERNOR. That could take years. Meanwhile, you've taken a ton of tax revenue off the table.

FRANKLYN. I'll cut down blight and increase job opportunities—give everybody up there something to feel good about. No revenues lost—just shifted from one end of the city to another.

GOVERNOR. You still have a nasty crime problem. All those gun deaths.

FRANKLYN. Give me more funding. I can hire more cops.

GOVERNOR. There's no money in our current budget, but maybe our state could get a larger piece of federal funding with a forceful advocate in the Senate.

FRANKLYN. Yes, I could get that money.

GOVERNOR. Good. You're coming around.

FRANKLYN. I could get that money more effectively if I was governor.

GOVERNOR. Excuse me?

FRANKLYN. The right governor can be stronger than a senator.

GOVERNOR. More surprises from you…

FRANKLYN. I'm the best-known politician in the state—besides you, of course.

GOVERNOR. You step on toes, Frank. You hurt people; a part of the game, but you take too much pleasure in it.

FRANKLYN. Endorse me, and a lot of those toes get out of the way. I can win the statehouse, Governor, and my coattails will be wide enough for us to keep the Assembly.

GOVERNOR. I owe a lot of people, Frank.

FRANKLYN. All of our big-city mayors will back me, and some of the larger towns, too.

GOVERNOR. A lot of good people want the job.

FRANKLYN. My coalition was key to your getting a second term and keeping our party in the majority.

GOVERNOR. As I said, it's too early for me to put my hand on anyone's shoulder.

FRANKLYN. MacMannis and those other CEOs will back me, and that's a lot of cash.

GOVERNOR. You really think you can win?

FRANKLYN. I'm the best man for the job. Tell me to my face that I'm not.

GOVERNOR. You and I will speak again.

FRANKLYN. I look forward to it.

They shake hands.

Lights.

Scene 2

Lights up on Franklyn and Jeffrey Calabrese studying a planning map spread out across a conference table. Upstage, Zack Drayton, Longley's chief of staff, stares, concerned, out of a window. There is a disturbance from the street below that threatens to distract—Tricia Johnson.

TRICIA. *(Offstage.)* Mr. Mayor! Mr. Mayor! Help me! Help me!

CALABRESE. You know, Mr. Mayor, I grew up in this city. I have a lot of fond memories here.

TRICIA. *(Offstage.)* I need a place to live! Help me, somebody! Somebody, help me!

FRANKLYN. Really? What part of town?

TRICIA. *(Offstage.)* I know you up there. I see you peekin' out the window! You got to help me!

Franklyn gestures to Zack, who shrugs his shoulders and lifts his hands, palms up, in a gesture of seeming helplessness. Franklyn glares, then quickly turns back to listen further to Calabrese.

CALABRESE. Laurel Gardens.

FRANKLYN. I'll be damned. I taught there in the eighties. Chancellor High School.

CALABRESE. No kidding? You taught school?

FRANKLYN. Ten years. Civics.

TRICIA. *(Offstage.)* I've got nothing. I've got nobody! Mr. Mayor, please help me! I ain't never hurt nobody! I'm doing the best I can out here!

CALABRESE. *(Indicating Tricia Johnson outside.)* I saw that lady on the news. Looks like you've got a one-woman protest going on.

FRANKLYN. We're handling it.

Franklyn looks at Zack, who pulls his cell phone from his pocket and makes a frantic and angry call.

TRICIA. *(Offstage.)* I need to live! It ain't right what's happening to me! It ain't right!

FRANKLYN. I have these kinds of flare-ups all the time. Comes with the territory. Sorry for the disturbance.

CALABRESE. No. No problem at all.

FRANKLYN. Good. You were telling me that you went to Chancellor High.

CALABRESE. A good forty years ago. I wonder, was Mr. Braverman still around when you were there?

TRICIA. *(Offstage.)* I'm doing the best I can, and I—

Suddenly, she is silenced in mid-sentence.

FRANKLYN. George Braverman? Yes, he was. But I caught him just as he was nearing retirement. Really nice guy.

CALABRESE. Ballbuster in the classroom, though.

FRANKLYN. Yea. Old George could be very demanding. I remember your time. You were there in the last of the golden era.

CALABRESE. Chancellor High was quite a place back then. Ranked among the top five high schools in the country. And that included private and parochial as well as public.

FRANKLYN. Yea, growing up, I used to hear a lot about that whole Laurel Gardens neighborhood. First time I ever went over there was

AUTUMN
by Richard Wesley

4 men, 3 women

Franklyn Longley is a veteran big-city mayor who's in line to become the first black governor of his state—until his godson is tapped by the party to run instead. As a new generation of black politicians comes forward, they must learn there is a price to pay in order to realize their ambitions. This gripping political drama explores the conflicts that arise when aspirations collide across generational, racial, and gender divides.

"You don't take your mind off of AUTUMN for a minute as it proceeds, and you think about it long after its final bows."
—NealsPaper.com

"AUTUMN is a well-drawn…contemporary drama about the ever-changing urban American political mosaic, its casualties, and its winners." **—NewBrunswickToday.com**

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ISBN 978-0-8222-3899-7