

## MONTAGE

wall. An antique sink in the corner appears to have its original fixtures. The mirror is rimmed with light bulbs. The cruddy glamour of the space screams Broadway. And yet, nearly every day, after stepping into a crisp, lavender dress, muting her shock of black curls into a demure bun, and strapping her microphone to her chest, Davis strides onstage to star in a Broadway show that screams, "This is not a Broadway show!"

She plays The Mother in *Passing Strange*, the coming-of-age story of a middle-class black teen—The Youth—who's a little too smart for his own good. With his mom's reluctant blessing, he heads off to Amsterdam and Berlin to hobnob with free-lovers and anarchists. He's searching for a life that he sees as more "real" than his own bourgeois upbringing, but he can't escape the stubborn love of his flawed but strong mother, which catches



**Mother and son, and creator:** Eisa Davis with Daniel Breaker, *The Youth*, and rock musician Stew, who is *Passing Strange's* Narrator

up with him when he least expects it.

The plot sounds simple, but the musical might be the most original in a string of unconventional productions that have

changed the face of Broadway recently, including *Spring Awakening* and *In the Heights*. Like its more famous cousins, *Passing Strange* more closely resembles a rock-concert-cum-literature-seminar than an Andrew Lloyd Webber popera. Its title is lifted from *Othello*, and its lyrics are sharply witty and subversively clever, overflowing with casual references to Hegel and Marx, Truffaut and Godard, James Baldwin and Josephine Baker.

Stew, the mononymous rock musician who wrote the show and serves as its narrator, draws inspiration from gospel, soul, vaudeville, cabaret, and punk—nearly every genre, in fact, except traditional musical theater. At one point, *The Youth* breaks into a giddy

## Off the Shelf

Recent books with Harvard connections

**Love Marriage**, by V.V. Ganeshananthan '02 (Random House paperback original, \$14). This debut novel, begun as the author's senior thesis (she has since graduated from the Iowa Writer's Workshop), explores family and marriage—arranged, or for love—in the context of Sri Lanka's horrific, now generational, civil war.

**Free Trade Nation**, by Frank Trentmann, Ph.D. '99 (Oxford \$50). Amid American anxieties about globalization and election-year skirmishing over trade pacts, a professor of history at Birkbeck College, University of London, exhaustively explores Britain's "Free Trade" culture

**The misery of free trade: a British worker and his family suffer from foreign "dumping" in a tariff-reform poster (ca. 1909)**



from the nineteenth century to World War I, documenting the interplay of "commerce, consumption, and civil society."

**The Ark of the Liberties: America and the World**, by Ted Widmer '84, Ph.D. '93 (Hill and Wang, \$24). A sweeping history of Americans' sense of themselves as a chosen people—bearing "the ark of the liberties," in Melville's phrase—and the consequences for the country's constant international engagements; the author directs the John Carter Brown Library at Brown University.

**Environment: An Interdisciplinary Anthology**, edited by Glenn Adelson, Ph.D. '04; Gurney professor of English literature James Engell '73, Ph.D. '78; Brent Rallini '97; and Kevin P. van Anglen, Ph.D. '83 (Yale, \$70). Biology, environmental science, and literature are brought to bear on climate, biodiversity, energy, deforestation, and more—throughout some

950, often unexpected, pages of diverse readings.

**A Voyage Long and Strange: Rediscovering the New World**, by Tony Horwitz, RF '06 (Henry Holt, \$27.50). A Pulitzer Prize-winning former Radcliffe Fellow, Horwitz is among the best, and funniest, journalist-historians—even when he tracks down bloody, decidedly unfunny remnants of pre-Pilgrim America that we have chosen to forget, or remember only dimly, in tawdry, commercial ways.

**Einstein for the 21st Century**, edited by Pellegrino University Professor Peter Galison; Mallinckrodt research professor of physics Gerald Holton; and Silvan Schweber (Princeton, \$35). Essays on the iconic thinker's continuing relevance for scientific inquiry, literature, art, music, and modern culture in general.

**Ahead of the Curve**, by Philip Delves Broughton, M.B.A. '06 (Penguin, \$25.95, paper). The author, a former *Daily Telegraph* journalist, recounts his two years at Harvard Business School. "Until I was there," he discovers, "I had underestimated capitalism's power to sow such in-

pantomime of what Stew has just referred to as an “upbeat, gotta-leave-this-town kinda show tune.” “We don’t know how to write those kinds of songs,” Stew interrupts, with a sly grin. Although Davis is quick to praise more conventional musicals—“I’m so excited that we’re on the same street as *Gypsy* and *Spamalot*”—she is also quick to point out *Passing Strange*’s many differences from them. “Everyone who sings in our play is singing for a reason,” she says. “It’s not just, ‘Let’s drop in a song.’ Every moment is a full-frontal attack of meaning and story.”

DAVIS HERSELF was born into a very different kind of black family, but it marked her in a very similar way. She was raised in Berkeley by her mother, a civil-rights lawyer, and her aunt and namesake, former Black Panther Angela Davis. “We spent a lot of time at demonstrations,” she remembers. “The idea of social activism and justice on both a local and global level was just everyday. All of us wore black to school when Reagan was reelected.”

## “Playwriting has helped my acting and music by allowing me to see the entire picture...”

Davis’s mother was serious about exposing her to a variety of arts—dance, theater, music—and Davis responded by embracing nearly all of them, taking piano and dance lessons and putting on plays in their living room. She admits that she applied to Harvard on a lark, but once there, she was surprised and delighted to be surrounded by people who shared her drive to perform. She sang in a cover band, helped found two literary journals, and acted often, winning the Levy Award (for most promising actor or actress) in her senior year. She still speaks with giddy enthusiasm about studying film with Spike Lee and playwriting with Adrienne Kennedy, a leader in the Black Arts Movement, who became a mentor. And she concentrated in social studies; her senior thesis explored the role of parody and humor in identity politics, an issue she and her current castmates, who refer to themselves as the “Al-

ternanegros,” continue to delve into in *Passing Strange*, which is often disconcertingly blunt and jokey about race.

After graduating, Davis moved to Los Angeles to help edit a hip-hop magazine and try to begin an acting career. Not until she started going into debt did she realize she had to “get serious” about a life in the arts, or get out. She promptly left for New York and enrolled at the Actors Studio, studying acting, playwriting, and vocal technique. Since earning her M.F.A., she has acted on TV (*Law and Order*, *The Wire*) as well as on stage. She has written eight plays, including *Bulrushers*, a finalist for the 2007 Pulitzer Prize. And she has spent large chunks of her free time writing soulful, jazz-inflected songs, which she performs often at venues like Joe’s Pub and the Brooklyn Academy of Music.

At 37, she is wholly uninterested in choosing a specialty, rejecting the idea that

security.” He decides not to pursue the business plan for a high-end laundry; he does offer useful critiques of HBS.

**Out of Mao’s Shadow: Stories from the Struggle for China’s Soul**, by Philip P. Pan ’93 (Simon & Schuster, \$28). The former *Washington Post* Beijing bureau chief reports on a “venal party state” being challenged by a “ragtag collection of lawyers, journalists, entrepreneurs, artists, hustlers, and dreamers striving to build a more tolerant, open, and democratic China.”

**Kelly: A Father, A Son, An American Quest**, by Daniel J. Boyne, Ed.M. ’93 (Mystic Seaport, \$34.95). The author, coach of recreational sculling, produces a life of Jack Kelly Sr.—an Olympic gold-medal oarsman who learned the sport on the Schuylkill, a politician, and the father of the perhaps better known Grace. Various later generations of Kellys rowed the Charles for Harvard.

**When Things Fell Apart: State Failure in Late-Century Africa**, by Robert H. Bates, Eaton professor of the science of government and professor of African and African American studies (Cambridge, \$19.99,



Jack Kelly Sr., wearing his Olympic racing shirt, 1920

grew up in America in the 1930s, the author enrolled at Harvard in 1948, but returned to

the People’s Republic of China in 1950, inspired to help bring about a new order in the early days of the Korean War. His facility with English and his overseas experience equipped him to interpret for Zhou Enlai and Mao Zedong and ultimately led to diplomatic postings, including at the United Nations—more than routine memoir material.

**Blown to Bits: Your Life, Liberty, and Happiness after the Digital Explosion**, by Hal Abelson, Ken Ledeen ’67, and McKay professor of computer science Harry Lewis ’68, Ph.D. ’74 (Addison-Wesley, \$25.99). Evolved from Quantitative Reasoning 48, the Core course on “Bits,” jointly created and taught by the authors, this is a lively, accessible, and illustrated introduction to the digital world, from the seven “koans of bits” to the science of encryption to the footprints you leave when you use e-mail, Google, et cetera. The authors challenge readers to determine whether the outcome will be “destructive or enlightening.”

paper). A theoretical explanation, admirably concise and clear, of why “political order cannot be treated as a given.” The author is painfully aware of the tragic consequences for a beleaguered continent, from “the sinisterly clownish garb of teenage killers in Liberia” to “the dignified suffering of refugees in camps.”

**The Man on Mao’s Right**, by Ji Chaozhu ’52 (Random House, \$28). A refugee who