

ntozake shange's  
choreopoem

# for colored girls



who have considered  
suicide / when the  
rainbow is enuf

A Vivid Reimagining of a Groundbreaking Classic  
Directed by Sarah Bellamy & Lou Bellamy

A Penumbra Theatre Company Production  
September 18 – October 14, 2018

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Penumbra Theatre Company Study Guide

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*“We are in this business not just to move audiences with great art, but to support justice, to use the unique power of theatre to open hearts and minds.”*

—Sarah Bellamy, Artistic Director

## **ABOUT PENUMBRA THEATRE COMPANY**

Conceived in the Black Arts Movement and Founded in 1976 by Artistic Director Emeritus Lou Bellamy, Penumbra Theatre Company has long served as a nurturing space for the artistic exploration of the African American experience. As the sole professional African American theatre in Minnesota, Penumbra carries forth a long, proud tradition of providing career-building opportunities to theatre practitioners of color, both on and off-stage. Penumbra has produced all ten of Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright August Wilson’s Century Cycle plays, cementing his renown as one of the most important playwrights of modern time.

Penumbra Theatre’s production history spans the depth and breadth of the African American theatrical canon, illuminating pioneers such as Lorraine Hansberry (*A Raisin in the Sun*, *Les Blancs*) and Charles Fuller (*A Soldier’s Play*, *Zooman and the Sign*), genre-bender Ntozake Shange (*Spell #7, for colored girls who have considered suicide when the rainbow is enuf*), late 20th century stalwarts August Wilson and Pearl Cleage (*Flyin’ West*, *Blues for an Alabama Sky*), and emerging stars such as Katori Hall (*The Mountaintop*) and Dominique Morisseau (*Sunset Baby*, *Detroit ’67*). Langston Hughes’ *Black Nativity* signifies the cornerstone of Penumbra’s contribution to the black musical theatre tradition. Each year 40,000 people see a play or musical at Penumbra Theatre and experience the variety of lenses through which African Americans view and engage with the world. In its 41-year history, Penumbra Theatre has produced 37 premieres of new work by African American artists.

## **THE MISSION**

Penumbra Theatre creates professional productions that are artistically excellent, thought provoking, and relevant and illuminates the human condition through the prism of the African American experience.

Penumbra’s goals are:

- To increase public awareness of the significant contributions of African Americans in creating a diversified American theatrical tradition.
- To encourage and facilitate a culturally diverse and all-inclusive America by using theatre to teach, criticize, comment and model.
- To use theatre to create an American mythology that includes African Americans and other peoples of color in every thread of the fabric of our society.
- To continue to maintain and stabilize a black performing arts community.

## **EDUCATION AND OUTREACH**

Penumbra's Educational and Outreach initiatives provide opportunities for audiences to explore the synthesis of theatre with social engagement. The observer is able to experience storytelling on the visual, audial, and aesthetic levels, while also engaging with the ideas of a play at their own pace, and through their most effective methods of understanding.

Strong educational and outreach programming makes the theatre a safe space for individuals to process personal, local, national, and worldwide events in cooperation with theatre practitioners, scholars, community leaders, and teaching artists. Penumbra provides audiences with a broad range of educational tools for analysis and reflection, increasing the possibility for life to follow art from idea to action.

Each year, Penumbra exposes 5,000 students to nurturing opportunities that range from summer internships to a multi-year leadership development program for teenagers. These programs allow young people to use theatre as a tool to experiment with their ideas of creating a more just and peaceful world. While some of these young people may go on to become theatre professionals, many more will emerge with increased capacity in the areas of critical thinking, creative problem-solving, self-expression, and community leadership. These skills will serve young people in their lives as entrepreneurs, service members, employees, and citizens.

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## The Poet

### Ntozake Shange: A Writer Who Writes

*"I write for young girls of color, for girls who don't even exist yet, so that there is something there for them when they arrive. I can only change how they live, not how they think." –ntozake shange*



#### **ntozake**

[/'entoʊ,zɑ:ki, EN-toh-zah-kee]

noun

1. *she who comes into her own things*

#### **shange**

[/'ʃɑ:ŋ,geɪ/ SHAHNG-gay]

noun

1. *she who walks like a lion*

Ntozake Shange<sup>1</sup> was born Paulette Williams into an upper middle-class African-American family. Her father was an Air Force surgeon and her mother a psychiatric social worker. Cultural icons like Dizzie Gillespie, Miles Davis and W.E.B. DuBois were regular guests in the Williams home. Shange attended Barnard College and UCLA, earning both a bachelors and master degree in American Studies. Shange's college years were difficult, however, and frustrated and hurt after separating from her first husband, she attempted suicide several times before focusing her rage against the limitations society imposes on black women. While earning a master's degree, she reaffirmed her personal strength based on a self-determined identity and took her African name, which means "she who comes with her own things" and she "who walks like a lion" (from Xhosa, a Zulu dialect). Since then she has sustained a triple career as an educator, a performer/director, and a writer whose work draws heavily on her experiences of being a black female in America.

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<sup>1</sup> Biography adapted from:

Foundation, Poetry. "Ntozake Shange." *Poetry Foundation*, Poetry Foundation, 2010.  
[www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/ntozake-shange](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/ntozake-shange).

Shange is perhaps most famous for her play *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/When the Rainbow Is Enuf* (1975). A unique blend of poetry, music, dance and drama called a “choreopoem,” it “took the theatre world by storm” in 1975 noted Jacqueline Trescott in the *Washington Post*, as it “became an electrifying Broadway hit and provoked heated exchanges about the relationships between black men and women...Its form—seven women on the stage dramatizing poetry—was a refreshing slap at the traditional, one-two-three-act structures.” Mel Gussow, writing in the *New York Times*, stated that “Miss Shange was a pioneer in terms of her subject matter: the fury of black women at their double subjugation in white male America.” The play uses female dancers to dramatize poems that recall encounters with their classmates, lovers, rapists, abortionists, and latent killers. The women survive abuse and disappointment and come to recognize in each other the promise of a better future. The play received both enthusiastic reviews and criticism for its portrayal of African-American men. However, “Shange’s poems aren’t war cries,” Jack Kroll wrote in a *Newsweek* review of the Public Theatre production of *For Colored Girls*. “They’re outcries filled with a controlled passion against the brutality that blasts the lives of ‘colored girls’—a phrase that in her hands vibrates with social irony and poetic beauty. These poems are political in the deepest sense, but there’s no dogma, no sentimentality, no grinding of false mythic axes.” Critic Edith Oliver of the *New Yorker* remarked, “The evening grows in dramatic power, encompassing, it seems, every feeling and experience a woman has ever had; strong and funny, it is entirely free of the rasping earnestness of most projects of this sort. The verses and monologues that constitute the program have been very well chosen—contrasting in mood yet always subtly building.”

Shange’s next productions, *A Photograph: A Study of Cruelty* (1977), *Boogie Woogie Landscapes* (1977), *Spell No. 7* (1979) and *Black and White Two Dimensional Planes* (1979) impressed critics with their poetic quality. As Richard Eder wrote in the *New York Times*, “more than anything else, she [Shange] is a troubadour. She declares her fertile vision of the love and pain between black women and black men in outbursts full of old malice and young cheerfulness. They are short outbursts, song-length; her characters are perceived in flashes, in illuminating vignettes.” Don Nelson, writing in the *New York Daily News*, deemed *Spell No. 7* “black magic .... The word that best describes Shange’s works, which are not plays in the traditional sense, is power.”

Shange’s poetry, like her drama, is distinctively original. *Washington Post Book World* critic Harriet Gilbert praised Shange’s third book of poetry, *Nappy Edges* (1978), saying, “Nothing that Shange writes is ever entirely unreadable, springing, as it does, from such an intense honesty, from so fresh an awareness of the beauty of sound and of vision, from such mastery of words, from such compassion, humor and intelligence.” Alice H.G. Phillips described Shange’s style in the *Times Literary Supplement*: “She lets go with verbal runs and trills, mixes in syncopations, spins out evocative hanging phrases, variations on themes and refrains. Rarely does she come to a full stop, relying instead on line breaks, extra space breaking up a line, and/ or oblique strokes.” In her poetry, Shange does take many liberties with the conventions of written English, using nonstandard spellings and punctuation. Explaining her “lower-case letters, slashes, and spelling,” Shange has said that “poems where all the first letters are capitalized” bore her; “also, I like the idea that letters dance. ... I need some visual stimulation, so that reading becomes not just a passive act and more than an intellectual activity, but demands rigorous participation.” Her idiosyncratic punctuation assures her “that the reader is not in control of the process.” She wants her words in print to engage the reader in a kind of struggle, and not be “whatever you can just ignore.” The spellings, she said, “reflect language as I hear it. ... The structure is connected to the music I hear beneath the words.”

Shange plays with conventions in her novels as well. Her first full-length novel, *Sassafrass, Cypress, and Indigo* (1982), is an admixture of narrative, recipes, letters, poetry and magic spells. Wrote Doris

Grumbach in the *Washington Post Book World*, “Shange is primarily a poet...But her voice in this novel is entirely her own, an original, spare and primary-colored sound that will remind readers of Jean Toomer’s Cane.” Shange’s other novels include *Betsey Brown* (1985) and *Liliane: Resurrection of the Daughter* (1995). *Liliane* again finds the author exploring the issues of race and gender in contemporary America in innovative prose. As Clarence Major noted in the *Washington Post Book World*, the story is presented “through twelve monologue-performance pieces narrated in turn by [Liliane] and her friends and lovers.” Shange “offers a daring portrait of a black woman artist re-creating herself out of social and psychological chaos,” remarked Kelly Cherry in the *Los Angeles Times Book Review*. Cherry added, “Shange has written a novel that manages to be both risky and stylish.”

In *The Love Space Demands*, a choreopoem published in 1991, Shange returned to the blend of music, dance, poetry and drama that characterized *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide*. “I’ve gone back to being more like myself,” Shange explained to Eileen Myles in the *Voice Literary Supplement*. Described by Myles as “a sexy, discomfiting, energizing, revealing, occasionally smug, fascinating kind of book,” *The Love Space Demands* includes poems on celibacy and sexuality and on black women’s sense of abandonment by black men. The lead poem of the book, “irrepressibly bronze, beautiful and mine,” was inspired by photographs of black and white gay men taken by Robert Mapplethorpe, author of *The Black Book* (1986), to which Shange had provided the forward.

Shange’s *The Sweet Breath of Life: A Poetic Narrative of the African-American Family* (2004), with photographs by the Kamoinge Workshop, is another example of her multi-media approach to poetry. The volume pays homage to *The Sweet Flypaper of Life*, which was published in 1955 by poet Langston Hughes and photographer Roy DeCarava. The Hughes and DeCarava edition, renowned for portraying the lives of African Americans in mid-20<sup>th</sup> century Harlem, features poems paired with photographs. Shange’s volume follows the same format but expands the theme into a broader exploration of the African-American experience. Critics, however, again gave Shange’s work mixed reviews. *Black Issues Book Review* contributor Patricia Spears Jones complained that Shange’s poems “directly respond to the photographs in such a manner that they feel more like journalism than poetry.” Yet *Booklist* reviewer Janet St. John responded to this issue in very different terms, stating that the poems and images are “inherently intertwined and equally expressive.”

Shange has also published essay collections, including *See No Evil: Prefaces, Essays, and Accounts 1976-1983* (1984) and *If I Can Cook You Know God Can* (1999). The latter is full of conversational essays that take the reader to the tables of African Americans, Nicaraguans, Londoners, Barbadoans, Brazilians, and Africans. A *Booklist* reviewer noted that the recipes are interwoven with a “fervent, richly impassioned chronicle of African-American experience” that examines political turmoil and relates “how connections are made beyond issues of class or skin color.” In addition to poetry, novels, essays, and screenplays, Shange has taken on the field of children’s literature with the publication of four books for children: *Whitewash* (1997), the tribute to Mohammed Ali *Float Like a Butterfly* (2002), *Ellington Was Not a Street* (2003), and *Daddy Says* (2003).

Shange also edited *The Beacon Best of 1999*, a collection of poems, short stories, and essays written by lesser-known men and women of color. Shange defines the work of writers she profiled in *Beacon’s Best* as “artful glimpses of life at the end of the twentieth century,” which perhaps also describes Shange’s work at its most acclaimed and creative.

## Words from the Wordsmith—Ntozake Shange

LIKE MOST PEOPLE OF COLOR, BLACK PEOPLE IN THE New World, I came by my passion for literature in a circuitous way, a night journey marked by music, movement, improvisation, and smells of perfume, sweat, and humid star-flickering nights. I pay tribute and homage, first to the wondrous miracle of language on an African's tongue." --*ntozake shange*

I started writing because there's an absence of things I was familiar with or that I dreamed about. One of my senses of anger is related to this vacancy - a yearning I had as a teenager...and when I get ready to write, I think I'm trying to fill that. . .

*When I die, I will not be guilty of having left a generation of girls behind thinking that anyone can tend to their emotional health other than themselves.*

Novels allow me  
to create a whole  
WORLD

*my spirit is too ancient to understand  
the separation of soul & gender*

I'm committed to the idea that one of the few things human beings have to offer is the richness of unconscious and conscious emotional responses to being alive.

I'm committed to the idea that one of the few things human beings have to offer is the richness of unconscious and conscious emotional responses to being alive.

*I had to write so that somebody would realize what my life was like...somebody/anybody sing a black girls song bring her out to know herself to know you*

*I am gonna write poems til i die and when i have gotten outta this body i am gonna hang round in the wind and knock over everybody who got their feet on the ground.*



# The Choreopoem

## The History

*"With music came movement because we were colored and southern. Dance was something we did like other folks walk, or sip coffee, I imagine."* —**ntozake shange**

*"Choreopoem, a term first coined by Shange in 1975 to describe her work *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow is Enuf*, is a form of dramatic expression that combines [storytelling, music,] dance, and poetry, resulting in an emotional whirlwind unmatched by either medium on their own."* —**KARA BROOKS**

*"Shange carved for herself a permanent and classic place in American theatre history when she successfully broadened and redefined American theater to include the choreopoem as an acceptable, legitimate dramatic form. Not only did she popularize the choreopoem, but she brought to the American theater an art that was undeniably African. Shange's choreopoem like African theater is comprised of chants, poetry, dance, and rituals. With the popular appeal and commercial success of *For Colored Girls*, American theater would never be the same."* —**ELIZABETH BROWN-GUILLROY**

### excerpt...

*a history: for colored girls who have  
considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf  
by Ntozake Shange*

*for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf* was first presented at the Bacchanal, a woman's bar just outside Berkeley, California. With Paula Moss & Elvia Marta who worked with me in Raymond Sawyer's Afro-American Dance Company and Halifu's The Spirit of Dance; Nashira Ntoshia, a guitarist and program coordinator at KPOO-FM (one of the few Bay Area stations focusing on women's programming); Jessica Hagedorn, a poet and reading tour companion; and Joanna Griffin, co-founder of the Bacchanal, publisher of Effie's Press, and a poet. We just did it. Working in bars was a circumstantial aesthetic of poetry in San Francisco from Spec's, and old beat hangout, to 'new' Malvina's, Minnie's Can-Do Club, the Coffee Gallery, and the Rippletad. With as much space as a small studio on the Lower East Side, the five of us, five women, proceeded to dance, make poems, make music, make a woman's theater for about twenty patrons. This was December of 1974. We were a little raw, self-conscious, and eager. Whatever we were discovering in ourselves that nite had been in process among us for almost two years.

I first met Jessica and Nashira thru Third World Communications (The Woman's Collective) when the first anthology of Third World women writers in the U.S.A. was published. With Janice Mirikitani, Avotcja, Carol Lee Sanchez, Janet Campbell Hale, Kitty Tsui, Janice Cobb, Thulani, and a score more San Francisco was inundated with women poets, women's readings, and a multilingual woman presence, new to all of us and desperately appreciated. The force of these readings on all our lives was to become evident as we directed our energies toward clarifying our lives--and the lives of our mothers, daughters, and grandmothers—as women. During the same period, Shameless Hussy Press and The Oakland

Women's Press Collective were also reading anywhere and everywhere they could. In a single season, Susan Griffin, Judy Grahn, Barbara Gravelle, and Alta, were promoting the poetry and presence of women in a legendary male-poet's environment. This is the energy & part of the style that nurtured *for colored girls* . . .

Such joy and excitement I knew in Sonoma, then I would commute back the sixty miles to San Francisco to study dance with Raymond Sawyer, Ed Mock, and Halifu. Knowing a woman's mind and spirit had been allowed me, with dance I discovered my body more intimately than I had imagined possible. With the acceptance of the ethnicity of my thighs and backside came a clearer understanding of my voice as a woman and as a poet. The freedom to move in space, to demand of my own sweat a perfection that could continually be approached, though never known, was poem to me, my body, and mind eclipsing, probably for the first time in my life. Just as Women's Studies had rooted me to an articulated female heritage and imperative, so dance was explicated by Raymond Sawyer and Ed Mock insisted that everything African, everything halfway colloquial, a grimace, a strut, an arched back over a yawn, was mine. I moved what was my unconscious knowledge of being in a colored woman's body to my known everydayness. The depth of my past was made tangible to me in Sawyer's *Ananse*, a dance exploring the Diaspora to contemporary Senegalese music, pulling ancient trampled spirits out of present tense Afro-American Dance. Watching Ed Mock re-create the Step Brothers' or Bert Williams' routines in class or on stage, in black face mimicking Eddie Cantor or Gloria Swanson, being the rush of irony & control that are the foundation of jazz dance, was as startling as humbling. With Raymond Sawyer and Ed Mock, Paula Moss and I learned the wealth of our bodies, if we worked, if we opened up if we made the dance our own.

In other words, all the readings and choreopoetry that Paula Moss & I developed after that summer was *for colored girls*.... We started at the Bacchanal and worked through the winter at Ed Mock's Dance Studio with the assistance of West Coast Dance Works, setting pieces & cleaning up poems. I found two bands, The Sound Clinic (a horn trio) & Jean Desarmes and his Reggae Blues Band, who agreed to work with us if I found space and I did. The space we used was the space I knew: Women's Studies Departments, bars, cafes, and poetry centers. With the selection of poems changing, dependent upon our audience and our mood and the dance growing to take space of its own so that Paula inspired my words to fall from me with her body, the Sound Clinic working with new arrangements of Ornette Coleman compositions and their own, the Reggae Blues Band giving Caribbean renditions of Jimi Hendrix and Redding, we set dates for Minnie's Can-Do Club in Haight-Ashbury. The poets showed up for us, the dancers showed up for us, the women's community showed up, and we were listed as a 'must see' in The Bay Guardian. Eight days after our last weekend at Minnie's, Paula and I left to drive cross country to New York to do 'the show,' as we called it, at the Studio Rivbea in New York.

Our work in San Francisco was over. With the courage of children, we staged the same sort of informal and improvised choreopoems at Rivbea during the Summer Music Festival. Instead of the Standing-Room-Only crowds we were accustomed to in San Francisco, my family and a few friends came to see our great project. One of these friends, Oz Scott, & my sister, Ifa Iyaun, who were instrumental in the development of *for colored girls* . . . saw the show that night. Oz offered to help me with the staging of the work for a New York audience, since Paula & I obviously didn't understand some things. We moved from the Rivbea to the Old Reliable on East 3<sup>rd</sup> Street to work through some of the ideas Oz had and the new things Paula and I were developing. Gylan Kain of the Original Last Poets was working there every Monday night. We worked with him & any other poets & dancers who showed up. Several members of the original New York show came to us just this haphazardly. Aku Kadogo and I both had scholarships at Diane McIntyre's Sounds-in-Motion Dance Studio. I asked her if she felt like improvising on the Lower

East Side, she agreed and has been with the show ever since. Laurie Carlos stopped by one evening. She stayed. Somehow word got out and people started coming to the back room of this neighborhood bar. We were moved to a new bar down the street, DeMonte's, after eleven weeks of no-pay hard-work three sets a night—maybe a shot of cognac on the house.

The show at Demonte's was prophetic. By this time, December of 1975, we had weaned the piece of extraneous theatricality, enlisted Trazana Beverley, Laurie Carlos, Laurie Hayes, Aku Kadogo, and of course, Paula and I were right there. The most prescient change in the concept of the work was that I gave up directorial powers to Oz Scott. By doing this, I acknowledged that the poems and the dance worked on their own to do & be what they were. As opposed to viewing the pieces as poems, I came to understand these twenty-odd poems as a single statement, a choreopoem.

## The Women/The Colored Girls

*"& this is for colored girls who have considered suicide but moved to the ends of their own rainbows"—ntozake shange*



### **lady in brown**

i'm outside Chicago  
i can't hear anything  
but maddening screams  
& the soft strains of death  
& you promised me  
you promised me...  
somebody/ anybody  
sing a black girl's song  
bring her out to know herself to know you  
but sing her rhythms  
carin/struggle/ hard times  
sing her song of life  
**i channel Babalu Aye**



### **lady in purple**

i'm outside houston  
here is what i have/poems/big  
thighs/lil tits/&  
so much love/ will you take it from  
me this one time/  
please this is for you/ arsenio's  
trees cleared the way  
& makes me pure again/please  
please/ this is for you  
I want you to love me/ let me love  
you/ I don't wanna  
dance wit ghosts/ snuggle lovers i  
made up in my drunkenness/  
lemme love you just like I am/ a  
colored girl/ I'm finally bein  
real/no longer symmetrical &  
impervious to pain  
**i channel Oyá**





## **lady in blue**

i'm outside manhattan  
 & poem is my thank-you for music  
 & I love you more than poem  
 more than aureliano buendia loved  
 macondo  
 more than hector lavoe loved himself  
 more than the lady loved gardenias  
 more than celia loves cuba or graciela  
 loves el son  
 more than the flamingoes shoo-do-n-  
 doo-wah love bein pretty  
**i channel Yemayá**



## **lady in green**

i'm outside san Francisco  
 somebody almost walked off wit  
 alla my stuff  
 not my poems or a dance I gave  
 up in the street  
 but somebody almost walked off  
 wit alla my stuff  
 like a kleptomaniac working hard  
 & forgetting while  
 stealing  
 this is mine/this aint yr stuff/  
 now why don't you put me back  
 & let me hang out in my own self  
**i channel Ogun**





## **lady in yellow**

i'm outside detroit  
 i'm alive and that's what I was  
 discussing/how I am  
 still alive & my dependency on other  
 living beings for  
 love i survive on intimacy &  
 tomorrow/that's all i've  
 got going & the music was smack & you  
 knew about  
 that & still refused my dance was not  
 enuf/& it was all I had but being alive &  
 being a woman &  
 being colored is a metaphysical  
 dilemma/i havent conquered yet/  
**i channel Oshún**

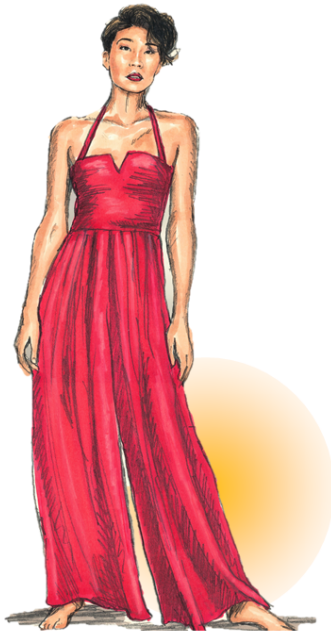


## **lady in orange**

i'm outside st. louis  
 i don't wanna write  
 in english or spanish  
 i wanna sing make you dance  
 like the bata dance scream  
 twitch hips with me cuz  
 i done forgot all about the words  
 ain't got no definitions  
 i wanna whirl  
 with you  
**i channel Svādhiṣṭhāna**  
 (sacral chakra)







## **lady in red**

i'm outside baltimore  
i fell into a numbness  
til the only tree I cd see  
took me up in her branches  
held me in the breeze  
made me chill at daybreak  
the sun wrapped me up swingin rose light  
everywhere  
the sky laid over me like a million men  
i waz cold/i was burnin up/a child  
& endlessly weavin garments for the moon  
wit my tears  
**i channel Shango**



Costume renderings by Matt Lefebvre  
Orisha renderings by Ubi Maya (Instagram @notovitch).

I wanted them to have information that I didn't have. I wanted them to know what it was truthfully like to be a grown woman. If there is an audience for whom I right, it's the little girls who are coming of age. I want them to know that they are not alone and that what we adult women thought and continue to think about them<sup>1</sup>.

– ntozake shange



### three little girls

mama's little baby likes shortnin, shortnin,  
mama's little baby likes shortnin bread  
mama's little baby likes shortnin, shortnin,  
mama's little baby likes shortnin bread little  
sally walker, sittin in a saucerrise, sally, rise,  
wipe your weepin eyes an put your hands on  
your hips an let your backbone slip o, shake it  
to the east o, shake it to the west shake it to  
the one that you like the best

I waz cold/ I waz burnin up/  
a child& endlessly weaving  
garments for the moon wit my tears  
**I found god in myself & I loved her/  
I loved her fiercely**

<sup>1</sup>Tate, Claudia, ed. Black women writers at work. Vol. 21. Burns & Oates, 1983.



## The Poems

*for colored girls who have considered suicide / when the rainbow is enuf*

by ArDonna D. Hamilton

*“rise up fallen fighters unfetter the stars  
dance with the universe & make it ours” — ntozake shange*

*The stage begins in darkness then illuminates seven women wearing individual colors of the rainbow: red, orange, yellow, green, blue, and purple. Each woman symbolizes different identities like a piece of the rainbow, which are beautiful on their own, but breathtaking as a whole. The seventh woman wears brown, which is representative of all colored women. The women live in different cities and time periods, but respond to each other through call-and-response, commune, and sometimes move as a collective. The women participate in a shared sacred experience throughout the choreopoem and impart wisdom, healing, and truth upon each other through their testimonies.*

### ***dark phrases***

*sing a black girl’ song  
bring her out  
to know herself*

The choreopoem opens in darkness, stillness interrupted by dissonant sound and blue light. Seven women in six rainbow colors scatter, leaving the lady in brown. Woman speaks of birth and duplicity, broken rhythms of heartbeats and muffled laughs, asking: “are we ghouls? children of horror? the joke?” and pleading: “sing the song of her possibilities...let her be born and handled warmly.” Shange wants us to know there are many represented in the one voice and invites the other six women to play.

### ***graduation nite***

*he started looking at me real strange  
like i waz a woman or somethin/*

lady in yellow describes the carousal of her graduation night and indulges in her newly-found sensual freedom. “i waz the only virgin so i hadda make like my hips waz into some business.” Woman expresses excitement around her budding womanhood, a desire to be pleased, and pride in her first sexual experience. “WE WAZ FINALLY GROWN.”

### ***now i love somebody more than***

*& poem is my thank-you for music  
& i love you more than poem*

lady in blue professes her love for dance, “if dancin was proof of origin i was jibarita herself,” willie colón, a puerto rican salsa musician and social activist from the bronx, “oyé négro te amo más que te amo más que when you play yr flute,” and the captivating power of music, “dontcha know i wore out the magic of juju heroically resistin being possessed.”

### ***no assistance***

*this waz an experiment to see how selfish i cd be*

lady in red recounts her 8 month, 2 weeks, and a day long one-sided relationship. “without any assistance or guidance from you i have loved you assiduously...i’ve left 7 packages on your doorstep forty poems 2 plants & 3 handmade notecards.” Woman is done. Woman realizes she can no longer devalue herself and fatigue her spirit to “see if i waz capable of debasin my self for the love of another if i cd stand not being wanted when i wanted to be wanted.” Woman resigns her exhausting attempt to “snare a lover” and reclaims her power by leaving. Poet wants us to know that love should not deplete you; your spirit song is too precious to be wasted on closed doors.

***i’m a poet who***

*we gotta dance to keep from dyin*

lady in orange surrenders to herself, claims her space, and is enraptured in music. “push your leg to the moon with me.” Woman flirts with liberation and finds strength in letting her body be free. “twitch hips wit me cause i done forgot all abt words.” Women join in and proclaim “we gotta dance to keep from cryin.”

***latent rapists’***

*these men friends of ours*

*who smile nice*

*stay employed*

*and take us out to dinner*

*lock the door behind you*

*wit fist in face to fuck*

Jarring light change moves ladies to “react as if they had been struck in the face.” Women speak on misconceptions about rape—“a rapist is always to be a stranger to be legitimate”—and share the revolting realities of rape by “these men friends of ours.” Women detail humiliating questions intended to absolve men from their actions “if you know him you must have wanted it...are you sure you didnt suggest,” and declare they will not submit, even to a friend. Women want you to know, it was not your fault. “pressin charges will be as hard as keepin yr legs closed,” but you are not to blame. “women relinquish all personal rights in the presence of a man who apparently cd be considered a rapist especially if he has been considered a friend,” but you could not have known. Women understand.

***abortion cycle #1***

*get those eyes offa me*

*get them steel rods outta me*

lady in blue illustrates the horrors of having an abortion. “bones shattered like soft ice cream cones...it hurts it hurts me.” Woman laments over her shame “i cdnt have people lookin at me pregnant” and that nobody came to support her because nobody knew she was pregnant. Woman feels isolated and scared and pain and empty. “once i waz pregnant & shamed of myself.”

***sechita***

*sechita had heard these things/she moved*

*as if she’d known them/*

lady in purple narrates the life of sechita, who is danced by lady in green. “sechita/ goddess/ the recordin of history/ spread crimson oil on her cheeks/ waxed her eyebrows/ n unconsciously slugged the last hard whiskey in the glass.” Sechita is a glamorous biracial performer who plays a goddess onstage, “the full moon/ sechita/ goddess/ of love/ egypt/ 2nd millennium/ performin the rites/ the conjurin of men/ conjurin the spirit,” but is still navigating her own beauty and feminine power removed from the male

gaze. Her body and stage persona receive golden tokens and applause, but that is not the real sechita and "god seemed to be wipin his feet on her face./"

***toussaint***

*& they waznt slaves no more*

lady in brown reminisces about her childhood, her discovery of and imaginary love affair with Toussaint L'Ouverture. Woman describes her admiration for Toussaint's strength and boldness against white colonial rule. "toussaint & them they held the citadel gainst the french wid the spirits of ol dead africans from outta the ground." Woman also understands the ramifications of integration and the violence that is often enacted upon black bodies in white spaces. "1955 waz not a good year for lil black girls." Woman wants to go to haiti, but meets toussaint jones, who also "dont take no stuff from no white folks." He isn't her beloved Toussaint L'Ouverture, but he is close enough.

***one***

*she wanted to be unforgettable*

lady in red narrates her life as a beautiful prostitute. "she glittered honestly delighted she waz desired." Woman embellishes herself with sequins, rhinestones, and butterflies, adorns herself with silk roses, and smells of sweet magnolia. "& they were so happy & lay on her lime sheets full & wet from her tongue." Woman takes many men to bed, expressing her desire to be "a wound to every man arrogant enough to want her," however, after each encounter, woman sheds her siren persona through ritual bathing and cries herself to sleep. "layin in water she became herself ordinary brown braided woman with big legs & full lips reglar." Though woman is man's fantasy, she is never fully seen. Though woman loves each night, she is never fully loved.

***i used to live in the world***

*my oceans were life*

*what waters i have here sit stagnant*

lady in blue mourns the loss of her expansive freedom that is now encapsulated within six blocks of harlem. "i usedta be in the world a woman in the world i hadda right to the world then i moved to harlem for the set-up." Woman expresses frustration with the lack of aesthetic beauty, genuine human connection, "nice is such a rip-off," incessant harassment, "COME OVER HERE BITCH CANT YA SEE THIS IS \$5," and the constant risk of assault, but woman knows she has a "right to the world."

***pyramid***

*love stood between them*

lady in purple describes a sisterhood of friends. "three friends one laugh one music." Woman narrates the friends all seeing and simultaneously falling in love with the same man, who chose one friend, but would eventually break all of their hearts. "i felt a quick thump in each one of us." Woman illustrates the unbroken friendship even through betrayal and infidelity when "the rose she left by his pillow she found on her friends desk & there waz nothing to say." Though the man eventually leaves one friend for another, they hold and support each other through their shared pain. "she held her head on her lap the lap of her sisters soakin up tears each understandin how much love stood between them."

***no more love poems #1***

*so this is a requiem for myself/ cuz i have died in a real way*

lady in orange shares her experience as a colored woman who feels suffocated in her skin and dehumanized in her romantic relationships. "i dont know anymore/ how to avoid my own face wet wit my tears/ cuz i had convinced myself colored girls had no right to sorrow./" Woman laments over lost joy and

wounds of depleting herself, but never being good enough for her lover. “& then there’s that woman who hurt you/ who you left/ three or four times/ & just went back/ after you put my heart in the bottom of yr shoe.” Woman surrenders because she “cdnt stand bein sorry & colored at the same time.”

### ***no more love poems #2***

*i’m finally bein real/ no longer symmetrical & impervious to pain*

lady in purple shares her battle with depression. “i am really colored & really sad sometimes & you hurt me more than i ever danced outta.” Woman struggles with vulnerability and having an abundance of love to give, but she doesn’t know how to exist as herself and loves at the expense of her happiness. “to come wit you/ i hadta bring everythin the dance & the terror the dead musicians the hope & those scars i had hidden wit smiles and good fuckin.” Woman is overwhelmed with the yolk of her feelings and pleads “please please/ this is for you i want you to love me/ let me love you/ i dont wanna dance with ghosts.”

### ***no more love poems #3***

*i need to be loved/ & havent the audacity*

lady in blue laments the inability to be loved as her authentic self in a world that establishes whiteness as the norm and shames colored women for not assimilating. “we deal wit emotion too much so why dont we go on ahead & be white then/ & make everything dry & abstract with no rhythm.” Woman expresses frustration over owning and having the courage to seek out what she needs. “thinkin wont do me a bit of good tonite/ i need to be loved.”

### ***no more love poems #4***

*bein alive & bein a woman & bein colored is a metaphysical dilemma/ i havent conquered yet/*

lady in yellow tries to make sense of her existence, innate need for human connection, and desire for soul-fulfilling love. “my spirit is too ancient to understand the separation of soul and gender.” All women agree that their love is too delicate, too beautiful, too complicated, etc. to be thrown back on their faces.

### ***somebody almost walked off wid alla my stuff***

*this is mine/ ntozake ‘her own things’/ that’s my name*

lady in green shares her struggle with loving without giving up the essence of herself. “somebody almost got away with me/ in a plastic bag under their arm/ me dangling on a string of personal carelessness.” Woman expresses a deep regard for that which makes her unique and is saddened to realize that to some, she is nothing of value, but what matters is the value she places on herself. “i’m the only one/ can handle it.”

### ***sorry***

*if you called*

*to say yr sorry*

*call somebody*

*else*

All women share stories of “sorrys” they’ve received from men. “now i know that ya know i love ya, but i aint ever gonna love ya like ya want me to love ya, i’m sorry.” lady in blue declares she’s had enough. “cuz a sorry i am simply tired of collectin.” Woman will no longer strip herself of her emotions to gracefully accept men’s apologies for hurting her. “i will not call i’m not goin to be nice i will raise my voice scream & holler...& i wont be sorry for none of it.”

### ***a nite with beau willie brown***

*there waz no air*

lady in red narrates the lives of crystal, willie brown, and their children. After returning from deployment overseas, willie brown suffers from PTSD and alcoholism, and is physically abusive. Willie beats crystal in front of the children and crystal gets a restraining order from him. To force crystal to accept his marriage proposal, willie dangles the children out of the fifth story apartment window. When crystal could only whisper a yes, willie drops the children. “there waz no air./”

***a laying on of hands***

*i found god in myself*

*& i loved her/ i loved her fiercely*

All women of the rainbow lament they are missing something in their soul that stifles their beautifully unique fires. lady in red describes a deep depressive state—an existence between life and death—that led to a transformative encounter with god within herself. “the sun wrapped me up swingin rose light everywhere.” Women sing songs of joy. Women gather and lay hands on one another—breaking, restoring, healing, and affirming the divinity of their souls. Women “are movin to the ends of their own rainbows.”

*“The rainbow is a fabulous symbol for me. If you see only one color, it's not beautiful. If you see them all, it is. A colored girl, by my definition, is a girl of many colors But she can ' only see her overall beauty if she can see all the colors of herself: To do that, she has to look deep inside her. And when she looks inside herself she will find .... love and beauty.” —Ntozake Shange*

## The Dance

*"We must sing and dance or we shall die an inert, motionless, "sin ritmo" death. "Negros muertos," killed by a culture afraid of who we are and what we have to say with our bodies, our music, and our brains. Black folks do have brains. We even have ideologists, scholars, choreographers, and always the grace of the gods..." —ntozake shange*

**a celebration of black survival/  
black dance america/Brooklyn  
academy of music/ April 21-24, 1983**

### *Journal Entry #692*

*what does it mean that blk folks cd sing n dance?  
why do we say that so much/ we dont know what we mean /  
i saw what that means/ good god/ did I see/ like i cda  
walked on the water myself/ i cda clothed the naked & fed  
the hungry/ with what dance i saw tonite/ i don't mean dance  
i mean a closer walk with thee/ a race thru swamps that fall  
off in space/ I mean i saw the black people move the ground  
& set the stars beneath they feet/ so what's this mean that  
black folks cd dance/ well/ how abt a woman like dyane harvey  
who can make  
her body the night riders & the runaways/ the children hangin  
on their mama's dress/ while they father's beat to death/ the  
blood/ from the man's wounds/ his woman's tears/ the night riders  
go in off in the darkness/ the silence of the night  
how abt bernadine j. whose body waz all of that in 5 min-  
utes/ & whose very presence humbled all but the drum/  
now that's a dance/ like rael lamb careenin cross  
the stage on his bare stomach/ fifty feet/  
sounds like possums n rattlesnakes/ mississippi undercurrents  
& steamin hog maws/ tossin him from decatur to south texas/  
tearin him from contraction to leaps so expansive/ his body  
took the space allowed thirty redwood trees/ & those sounds  
kept pushin him/ little racing motors like the cops waz  
round the bend/ windows opened & shut cuz there are things  
others ought not to hear/ feet on stairways of burned down homes/  
the sounds pushed him/ & there was a dance that was a black  
dance/ that's what it means that black folks cd dance/ it  
dont mean we got rhythm/ it dont mean the slop or the hully  
gully/  
or this dance in houston callt "the white boy"/ it dont mean just  
what we do all the time/ it's how we remember what cannot be  
said/  
that's why the white folks say it aint got no form/ what was the  
form  
of slavery/ what was the form of jim crow & how in the hell  
wd they know...*

N. Shange, *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo*

## Journal entry #692/ Glossary of Terms

Term	Meaning
abt	About
blk	Black
cd	Could
cda	Could've
de	The
n	And
waz	Was
wd	Would
Aesthetic	Giving or designed to give pleasure through beauty; of pleasing appearance.
Careenin	To tilt, lean over. To move swiftly in an uncontrolled manner.
Choreographic	Of or having to do with the sequence of steps and movements in dance or movement.
Cliché	A phrase or opinion that is overused and unoriginal.
Colloquia	An academic conference or seminar.
Las Desenamoras	The unbeloved
Despair	The complete loss or absence of hope.
Diaspora	The dispersion of any people from their original homeland. The presence of African-descendant peoples around the world.
Distillation	The extraction of the essential meaning or most important aspects of something.
Floras Negras	Black flowers
Hog Maws	Pig stomach. Popular soul food.
Hully Gully	A popular dance from the 1960's.
Immersion	The action of immersing someone or something.
Implications	The conclusion that can be drawn from something, although it is not explicitly stated.
Jim Crow	Segregation laws and the practice of segregation in the United States. Based off of a minstrel show character, "Jim Crow," that was an uncoordinated and dim-witted black slave.
Lyricism	An artist's expression of emotion in an imaginative and beautiful way; the quality of

Term	Meaning
	being lyrical.
Mississippi Undercurrents	Rough undercurrents in the Mississippi River.
Night Riders	A militant group of tobacco farmers that protested the American Tobacco Company.
Racist	A person, generally from a majority race that benefits from the privilege, access, and power afforded to those in the majority, that shows or feels discrimination or prejudice against a person of another race.
Realms	A kingdom; a field or domain of activity or interest.
Una Regalo	A gift.
The Slop	A popular dance from the 1960's.

*"i've no doubt that inhabiting my mother's womb for all nine months left me twirling & crooning through the placenta & the water I'd yet to break. my father & mother were quite light on their feet & taken with jazz, rhythm & blues, bebop, & high life. anywhere the colored people were celebrating, my parents celebrated too. & i got to go cause i was still in my mother. so it's no surprise to me that I needed Sun Ra, Cecil Taylor, Prince, Ruth Brown, Duke Ellington, Jeanne Lee & Albertina Walker in order to live. one other special element of language which mother gifted me with was poetry...& that's what my life has been about, language & music & dance."—ntozake shange*



## The Original Lady in Yellow: Aku Kadogo Reflects on Her *for colored girls...* Experience



“but bein alive & bein a woman & bein colored is a metaphysical  
dilemma/ i havent conquered yet/ do you see the point  
my spirit is too ancient to understand the separation of soul & gender/  
my love is too delicate to have thrown back on my face  
—lady in yellow

dark phrases of womanhood  
of never havin been a girl  
half-notes scattered  
without rhythm/ no tune  
distraught laughter fallin  
over a black girl’s shoulder  
it’s funny/ it’s hysterical  
the melody-less-ness of her dance  
don’t tell nobody don’t tell a soul  
she’s dancin on beer cans & shingles  
—lady in brown

Aku Kadogo: Well, I met Ntozake and Paula in a dance class. I met them in Dianne McIntyre’s dace class...that was where we connected. We connected through movement and dancing. Dianne McIntyre had a company called Sounds-in-Motion which she talks about in the

Foreword of the first edition of *for colored girls who have considered suicide / when the rainbow is enuf*. So, with Diane's dance company we were already dealing with the merging of music and movement and poetry. It was powerful. We were coming into New York hot on the heels of the Black Arts Movement.

Note to the reader from Ntozake Shange's a history: *for colored girls who have considered suicide / when the rainbow is enuf*: "Aku Kadogo & I both had scholarships at Diane McIntyre's Sounds-in-Motion Dance Studio. I asked her if she felt like improvising on the Lower East Side, she agreed & has been with the show ever since. The show at Demonte's was prophetic. By this time, December of 1975, we had weaned the piece of extraneous theatricality, enlisted Trazana Beverley, Laurie Carlos, Laurie Hayes, Aku Kadogo, & of course, Paula & I were right there."

Aku Kadogo: Paula Moss was our choreographer and the original lady in green. She was—these are my words—like Ntozake's muse *for colored girls*.

Aku Kadogo: We were both dancers. Paula started out as a dancer. Ntozake would perform her poems and we would dance. When Oz Scott, the original director, came on board, we took on the words. Originally, I had been improvising with Ntozake. Then we all got involved in the text as well. From my point of view, we were involved with a kind of transcendent experience with colored girls...

Aku Kadogo: I was 21 years old—the youngest member of the ensemble. It was the era of the art ensemble of Chicago, the music from Leon Thomas and of Sun Ra...we were working with them. We were going to the clubs where we had these musical experiences and having transcendent responses to the performances, it was highly encouraged in the New York that we lived in.

Aku Kadogo: There was a lot of preparation work that had been done...As a student, I was going up to the National Black Theatre with Barbara Ann Teer, looking at Ritual and New Black Theatre. In Detroit, I had been a member of Concept East Theater where I performed *Sister Sonji* by Sonia Sanchez and I was relating to Ron Milner and the Spirit of Shango theater company. We were integrating words and movement because it was the 70's and that was what was happening. The work seemed natural. It didn't seem like something odd. It seemed like a progression.

Note to Reader: For more information, read: "The National Black Theatre: The Sun People of 125<sup>th</sup> Street" by Jessica B. Harris and "Notes on Ritual in the New Black Theater" by Shelby Steele in *The Theatre of Black Americans: A Collection of Critical Essays*, edited by Errol Hill.

Aku Kadogo: Ntozake's words in *for colored girls*... were so musical. That's the thing. She has such a musical way of approaching life. This is pre-Hip-Hop, but her writing is the foundation for what we see happening in Spoken Word and Hip-Hop Theatre today. It's real...it's

lyrical. It has a rhythm and it lent itself well to either bass or drums or strings or horns. There was a lyricism in her writing anyway and I know that to this day, I'm still attracted to poets who have a kind of lyricism in their work.

Aku Kadogo<sup>2</sup> is an international theatre director, choreographer, educator and creative producer of cultural arts projects. This multi-faceted artist directs highly energetic, imaginative theatre works and has produced a number of collaborative inter-disciplinary projects. Her eclectic career has spanned across the United States, Australia, Europe and Asia. She is the Chair of the Department of Theatre and Performance at Spelman College after having served as Distinguished Visiting Professor in 2014.

As a performer she has worked in film, television and stage making her career debut in the original Broadway classic of *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/When the Rainbow is Enuf* by Ntozake Shange.

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<sup>2</sup> Kadogo, Aku. "Aku Kadogo." *Akukadogo.com*, [www.akukadogo.com/About.html](http://www.akukadogo.com/About.html).

## A Vivid Reimagining of a Groundbreaking Classic

### A Conversation with Sarah Bellamy

Co-Director, *for colored girls who have considered suicide / when the rainbow is enuf*



*"My guiding light is that empathy can change the world."* —SARAH BELLAMY

Sarah Bellamy is a woman who continues to shine her light brightly, even though working to create a culture of empathy is sometimes a daunting and lonely pursuit. Yet, just as Ntozake Shange envisions, Sarah continues to move to the end of her own rainbow. Earlier this year, she was a proud recipient of the 2018 Hubert H. Humphrey Public Leadership Awards at the University of Minnesota. Laura Bloomberg, Dean of the Humphrey School, spoke on the occasion saying, "Tonight we are shining a bright light on leaders whose creative and incisive work inspires us and encourages all of us to think more broadly about who we are as neighbors inhabiting a small planet, as fellow global citizens and as leaders ourselves." During our phone conversation, I found Sarah to be inspirational as she shared her thoughts on art, spirituality, Social Justice, and of course, *for colored girls who have considered suicide / when the rainbow is enuf*.

—THERESA M. DAVIS

**TMD:** So Sarah, I like to call the week before a show opens a time of many miracles. How are you feeling?

**SB:** We're hoping for many miracles. I think the show's in really good shape. We ran it twice yesterday and after the first one, I said, "We have a show." Lou was like, "Yeah, we do." I

am so excited to move into tech and really build out the world. It's been a wonderful process. Really, really good.

**TMD:** You know September 15th marks the 55 years since the murder of the four little girls (Cynthia Wesley, Carole Robertson and Addie Mae Collins—all 14 years old-and 11-year old Denise McNair.<sup>3</sup> In your original "FCG Concept and Notes", you wrote: "*The concept for this show is centered around four little girls ranging in age from 10-15 years old. They have grown up together and are as close as sisters.*" Did you have this tragic event in mind as you began to consider the reimagining of this piece? Also, September 15, 1976 is *when the original for colored girls who have considered suicide / when the rainbow is enuf* opened at the Booth Theatre.

**SB:** It's in the zeitgeist, but it was not at the forefront. You know there's that line, *lady in brown* says where she's talking about Toussaint L'Ouverture and she mentions that 1955 was not a good year for little black girls. And so certainly that has evoked that devastating story. But it's ... you know, mostly, I think we're just thinking about the ways in which young girls have been grown up too fast by society. And affording them the opportunity to be young, to be safe and protected and sovereign for as long as they can be.

Note to the reader: from the lady in brown...

TOUSSAINT

*waz layin in bed wit me next to raggedy ann  
the night I decided to run away from my  
integrated home / integrated street / integrated school /  
1955 waz not a good year for lil blk girls (p. 27)*

**TMD:** Yes, yes. I so enjoyed reading the director notes that you shared. Do you happen to remember the first time that you saw the choreopoem performed?

**SB:** I don't. I don't remember. It's like I've always known about it.

**TMD:** I love what you just said, "It's like I've always known", that you've known it. Have you felt that when you've been directing it, that there has been a type of ... as August Wilson would say, a type of "blood memory" as you've been working on the piece?

Note to the reader: "Blood memory" refers "to that sensation we have when we open ourselves up to sensations simultaneously new and ancient."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/four-black-schoolgirls-killed-in-birmingham>

<sup>4</sup> Smith, Jamil. "Black Storytellers Matter: Why it's important that August Wilson spoke about the black experience" *NEW REPUBLIC* 248.12 (2015): 2-3.

**SB:** Yes! Absolutely. Much of what I'm doing is intuitive and really relying very heavily on this concept. And thinking about how the orishas can instruct us. How the text itself can instruct us. I can't believe how fertile this text is. It just gives and gives and gives and gives. So that's been really incredible to experience.

Note to the reader: "The orishas are the emissaries of Olodumare or God almighty. They rule over the forces of nature and the endeavors of humanity. They recognize themselves and are recognized through their different numbers and colors which are their marks..."<sup>5</sup>

**TMD:** How has working on this piece strengthened your work as a director?

**SB:** I think it definitely has made me more confident in my own artistry. That I do know how to do this work. And, you know, this is ... I think because this is not a play, it's very clear that this is not a play. It's a choreopoem. And it required a different approach. And I wasn't intimidated by that at the start and then got into it and thought, "oh wow, this is different". But again, it's that trust of your own intuition, trust of the text. And so that was very affirming.

**TMD:** Can you talk a little bit about your work with the team of creatives and the acting ensemble?

**SB:** This company of women that we're working with has been really, really incredible and so generous. Of course, my father [Lou Bellamy] and Ananya Chatterjea have been tremendous creative partners. You know, everybody's bringing something so rich and unique to the table. I've been very impressed with how smoothly we've blended all of our different aesthetics, and without incident, how smoothly and respectfully because there are a lot of cooks in this kitchen.

**TMD:** Dance is a major element in the choreopoem. Would you discuss your collaboration with the choreographer, Ananya Chatterjea?

**SB:** Yes. Well, first of all, I think she's a phenomenal human being and just an incredible artist and woman. I am so, so very fortunate to have her be part of this process. I love watching her work. I love the rapport she has with the company. It's very different than the one that Lou or I had established, her rigor is incredible. She's ferocious in her rigor. She's very specific in her aesthetic. The thing that's been so wonderful for me is I think in pictures when I direct. And so, I imagined, for example, this scene ... Do you remember the scene where the woman takes the bath after taking on all the lovers?

**TMD:** Yes, the poem entitled "one."

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.cs.indiana.edu/~port/teach/205/santeria2.html>

**SB:** I imagined these women encircling the lady in red and her laying back into another woman with her legs open, in a bath. I said "I know what I see" and I had structured the women in the way that I wanted to and I said "Ananya, go". And she created all of this lovely movement to make the bath look like it was undulating water. In the poem, "a nite with beau willie brown", I told her I wanted these two women red and purple, who were going to embody Beau Willie and Chrystal, to be warriors that were entering into combat. And to be possessed by these characters. Not that that's who they were, but rather that these characters were coming into them and they were going to undergo this mortal combat.

**TMD:** This is a powerful example of the "Efficacy" of Ritual Theatre<sup>6</sup> where the performer becomes possessed.

**SB:** I said, "I need this fight to happen and here's how I see it. I want the other goddesses to draw a ritual space around them. And I want these two women to go to war." [Ananya] tried some things and she said "what do you think?" I said "I like it, but can you make it more violent?" And she was able to ramp that up, she understands what I'm looking for, which is great. You know, there are times where she just knows where the dance happens in this piece. Because the text doesn't delineate when choreography should enter and when it shouldn't. There's a lot of room for interpretation anywhere so it's required that I'm real clear about what I feel like I want her to build out and what areas we can sort of hold as directors. That negotiation was very easy, actually. Which I was grateful for.

I trust story. She trusts movement. And that's a wonderful joining when it works.

**TMD:** Oh, most definitely. You mentioned, requesting that Ananya make the physicality be more violent in "a nite with Beau Willie Brown". Going back to the Orishas. Did you feel in that moment that you were channeling a particular one? Say Shango or another spirit? Have you found particular Orisha spirits coming to you throughout the process?

**SB:** I think that the one that's most present for me is Yemayá, and how she is lady in blue. The way that we've blocked this and the way that I've interpreted who lady in blue is on that stage, she's a high priestess. We talked about how she's got this moment when she talks about the ancient waters of Akra and Tunis, and now being in Harlem. I said, "you know Yemoja [Yemayá] was the one who went with folks through the middle passage. She went with her children. So, as you walk through these women who are coming up on you like waves, imagine those souls and the spirits". Yemoja has been very present. I think Shango is present in the way that we're approaching that last scene.

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<sup>6</sup> Schechner, Richard. "From Ritual to Theatre and Back: The Structure/Process of the Efficacy-Entertainment Dyad." *Educational Theatre Journal* 26.4 (1974): 455-481.

Note to the reader: “The High Priestess archetype signifies the feminine mode of consciousness—the inner knowing of the heart. This mysterious woman guards the gateway between the Earth and Spirit worlds, and reminds us to use and trust our intuition. She sits between two pillars, affirming the way of being true to yourself and your path, your destiny and purpose.”<sup>7</sup>

**SB:** And I think about a monologue that purple has in which I’ve blocked her to stand on this precipice and as she opens her heart, the sound of wind builds, and it’s as if Oyá is being called to fall into her own power, so we see the goddess being pulled but the embodied, corporeal woman must fight to resist falling, resist suicide, and find the will to survive.

**SB:** This is how we’ve imagined it for our production—lady in brown is Babalu Aye / lady in yellow is Oshún / lady in purple is Oyá / lady in red is Shango / lady in green is Ogún / lady in blue is Yemayá / and with the lady in orange we’ve used the sacral chakra to inform our understanding of this character.

Note to reader: For more information see: *& African Narratives of Orishas, Spirits and Other Deities—Stories from West Africa and the African Diaspora: A Journey Into the Realm of Deities, SPI*<sup>8</sup>

**TMD:** I had spoken to your father about Paul Carter Harrison's essay “Praise/Word”. In the essay he discussed the performative nature of African American Theatre and how it encompasses the acts of ritual, repetition and call-and-response. He also stated, “*At the core of African Diasporic performance is spirituality.*”

**SB:** Yeah, yeah. Yeah, it's funny, because you know we ... talking to our assistant stage manager and even my father sometimes, they're like, "This is out there. It's a little woo woo." and I'm like, "Yes, it is woo woo. It absolutely is. We're calling on the ‘Divine Feminine’”. I think what we've done is we've put such a rigorous structure around this concept of these “pure energy love beings” is what I'm calling them. These goddesses that become embodied for a moment in service of ushering these three little girls through to the other side of their own sovereignty. You know, to their own womanhood.

Note to the reader: “Honoring and connecting to the Divine Feminine is an act of worship, not only to oneself, but also to the Divine Mother — the essence of all creation and the God of your own distinct understanding of the universe. It is

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<sup>7</sup> Noble, Vicki. *Motherpeace: A way to the goddess through myth, art, and tarot*. Harper Collins, 2013.

<sup>8</sup> Cuoco, Alex. *African narratives of orishas, spirits and other deities: stories from West Africa and the African diaspora: a journey into the realm of deities, spirits, mysticism, spiritual roots and ancestral wisdom*. Outskirts Press, 2014.



a sacred connection to Mother Earth and to the very energy of giving birth ... to ideas, expressions, dreams, life and existence.”<sup>9</sup>

**TMD:** Referring back to your “FCG Concept and Notes”, you wrote: *“The Women have come to remind the girls of their sacred power and of the tremendous love to which they are heir.”*

**SB:** Yes, and we just keep going back to the idea that they are dropping into these stories in order to perform certain rites. And the hardest one is, of course, that very last monologue from lady in red about Beau Willie and Chrystal. Then the whole company sort of falls around them and comes to raise them up out of that and it's a great deal of labor for them to pull those women back out of those bodies. So, I think we've really relied heavily on that structure and that's been really instructive, the frame that we're using to guide us.

**SB:** The other thing that has been really helpful for me is being very, very clear about the difference between what I call the liminal space, which is upstage of the scrims and the player space, which is downstage of the scrims. There are two distinct places that I've set for those...

The liminal, as soon as women get caught in it, it's like it just takes them and they slow way down and their gestures become really liquid. So, you're understanding that they're constantly coming in and out and crossing these worlds and I think it's only going to get heightened with lighting.

**TMD:** You must be excited to see what when all of the artistic elements come together. When do you begin Technical Rehearsals/Tech?

**SB:** Tuesday, tomorrow.

**TMD:** How has your experience been working with members of the artistic staff as you've been preparing for Tech? How have you all vibed with each other?

**SB:** Beautifully. Beautifully. We have a costume designer that we have worked with many, many years. He's a long-time creative partner of my dad's. Matt Lefebvre, who has picked these really lovely jumpsuits for each of the women that are solidly their color—

**TMD:** Yes. I saw the costume renderings. They're lovely.

**SB:** We've had difficulty with orange because there's not a lot of orange jumpsuits. We really are trying to differentiate between orange and red.

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<sup>9</sup> Courter, Sara. "7 Simple Practices To Connect To Your Divine Feminine. " (2012). 13 September 2018.  
<https://www.mindbodygreen.com/0-17214/7-simple-practices-to-connect-to-your-divine-feminine.html>

**TMD:** I get it.

**SB:** So that's been a challenge. The sound designer that we're working with, she is more of the dance world and I would call her more a sound architect. She really does build worlds. Working inside of a theater company is a new process for her so she and I have both been like "Okay, we're going to learn together." She's been really open to that, which is nice. Very generous.

**TMD:** Let's go back to the previous mention of the scenic design. You mentioned briefly the scrim. I see great potential for sculpting images, seeing the figures in shadow, as well as directly. Can you talk a little bit about the artistic choices for the space?

**SB:** Lou and I sat down with Vicki Smith, another long-time collaborator with Penumbra, and we talked about the fact that we wanted to create a space that was otherworldly. That, you know, was almost like a clearing space where these women could convene and so she created these scrim and these large beams that have Adinkra symbols on them. It was gorgeous when we first saw it.

But I think one of the really big challenges of that from a set without lights is it's really about the Women. I mean there's nothing on the stage. There's no chairs, nothing! It's just the set. And so, you know, creating a diversity of stage pictures or creating stage business has been a little bit of a challenge. But as I've said, I'm confident that the lights will do so much for us. And really clarifying those two spaces has been helpful, in terms of blocking and composition.

We were definitely like, "Oh, this is ambitious."

**TMD:** Producing this bold reimagining of this classic is ambitious. Shange's poems deal with a lot of emotionally intense material. How do you feel that you and Lou have worked to create a safe environment for the women to be able to participate in the creative process?

**SB:** That's a great question. We spent a lot of time at the table with the text letting the company really ask questions and step through it at a pace that was really good...at the pace of trust, you know. That was really great. We said, "We want you all to be part of this. We want you to share your experiences. We can see it, but you're in it. So, make sure that you're communicating what you're feeling."

**SB:** There was a moment midway through rehearsal where I gave a bit of direction to one of the Women, and it came out wrong. I think it took her aback. And I'd saw that I had hurt her feelings. And I just stopped and I said, "You know I want to acknowledge that I think I hurt your feelings and I'm so sorry, that's not what I intended to do." I called the whole company to witness that because I was like, this isn't a sidebar conversation. We're all here and we're all in this together.

That was helpful for me to think about. Actors are so, so brave but they're also very fragile when they're in that generative process. That was a really helpful moment for me and I think it gelled the company too.

**TMD:** That was powerfully compassionate. Thank you for sharing that story. Not only you calling on and embodying the spirit of Yemayá, but you're also accessing the spirit of Osun. There was a lot of love shown in that moment, and a lot of courage.

**SB:** Thank you.

**TMD:** In an earlier conversation, you made mention of the Chakras and their colors as they relate to the Women. Chakra means wheel of energy in Sanskrit and they are seven in number. I love the fact that there are seven Women and seven Chakras. The Chakras are also seen as the centers of spiritual power. Do you see these women reclaiming their spiritual power over the course of the choreopoem? Have you and the ensemble identified moments where a particular Chakra might be blocked? When are they moving past a blockage? Do you think that each of the Women reclaim their spiritual power by the end of the poem, "a laying on of hands"?

**SB:** What a beautiful question. Yeah, I think there are definitely gestural moments that both Ananya and I have created that indicate both embodiment of, like I said, these "pure love energy beings" and also moments where they're connecting to heart center. When they're connecting to third eye, moments when they're connecting to sacral balance. That is definitely very evident. I think it's also very present in Ananya's aesthetic and her choreography as an Indian woman. So that's true.

**SB:** An interesting thing happened. Ananya had asked ... While I was away, I had to step away from rehearsal for a few days to go facilitate a retreat. I had roughed out the whole show, and Lou and Ananya were taking another pass through it to start refining. They stepped through this ending ritual that I had roughed out and she asked the women to perform these very delicate gestures where your left hand would be palm open and your right hand would be index finger in just kind of a gentle triangle and to touch the center palm of the left hand as a, "I found god in myself and I loved her. I loved her fiercely."

**TMD:** Oh, that's beautiful.

**SB:** It was really beautiful. It was gorgeous, but the women resisted it. The reason why is because they said by the time we've gotten here, each of us has earned this so personally. Our experience of embodiment has been so specific to each woman. We really want to be able to be free to express what that means to have found god in ourselves without it being choreographed. I said, "Okay, these gestures are in your toolkit. Use them if you'd like to and don't if you don't want to."

And oh, Theresa, when they passed through it again and they just had the freedom and the permission to do what they needed to do. It was so powerful... I mean, we were all in tears. You know, it was really, really wonderful moment.

**TMD:** The freedom and the permission...what a beautiful image. Sarah, what do you find in working with Lou? What freedoms have you two found working as co-collaborators? I have to tell you, though, it was so interesting, and he speaks so highly of your work as a director, he said, "In many ways, I feel like I'm assisting." He said, "I'm assisting," that he ... just your approach and your concept as he spoke about being invited into the process. So what type of freedoms do you think you two have experienced working together?

**SB:** That's such a nice question. Thank you for sharing that with me.

**TMD:** Of course.

**SB:** I feel that, but it's always nice to hear it reflected. He, you know, my father ... I don't know if he would say this, but I certainly believe and have witnessed that he's a master director. He's at a place in his craft that is so ... it's so precise. It's so powerful and to have him in the room supporting me has been absolutely incredible. I didn't know how this would work. You know, I don't think either of us knew who would take the lead and when. I think he was ready to do whatever I needed him to do, which is incredible. Ideally, that's what a parent does do but it's not always what happens.

He sort of, he said to me at one point, he said, "You deserve to have the show that you want to have. I want you to have that." I've told him many times, "You are the one who's taught me. I didn't study directing formally." In fact, the one time I took a directing class, it was his class.

**TMD:** I didn't know that.

**SB:** So, he is the one who taught me how to do this. Watching him and watching other directors at Penumbra. It's been largely intuitive and just by virtue of being around the rehearsal process as a young person. I think it's in me. You know, I think he saw that.

**TMD:** What a wonderful acknowledgement.

**SB:** So, it was really wonderful to be supported by him. He has ... where I had roughed out certain things, I'll look to him and I'll say, "How do we struggle with this?" We've gone back and forth with what we're trying to do with the Beau Willie and Chrystal scene and really tightening that and building the tension there. He's made some really wonderful contributions to ramping up the drama of things but he said, "You know, you got this. You know what this is and you're doing just fine."

And that's like when he says you're doing just fine, that's like a big compliment.

He's not an effusive man.

**TMD:** And you are. Sounds like you two complement each other well in the rehearsal process. When I visit the Penumbra website, for colored girls is described as, "a vivid reimagining of a groundbreaking classic". Have there been any particular challenges as you think about taking a piece that people know so well?

**SB:** I worry that perhaps we're taking liberties or, you know, you think about that as especially someone who's a writer. But it definitely feels within the spirit and within the evolution of the piece. I don't think that's true for every play, but I do think that this piece does evolve with time and as we as beings and women evolve.

My dad said something beautiful to the Women yesterday in rehearsal. He said, "You all are walking around in this, and you're carrying Ntozake. She is heavy. You can't carry her, but you can ride her wave. You can surf that. You've got to get up on top. She is the one who carries you." We all just went, "Whoa."

He said, "She's too grounded, you can't carry her. You've got to get on top of the language and trust it." And it was just this really powerful visualization and way of approaching the work that was ... I think it ramped it up.

**TMD:** Oh, thank you for sharing that. That is so, so powerful. Shange's Choreopoem does create this incredible space for people to talk openly about their pain in her groundedness. In her ability to know who she is, in such a powerful way. When the audiences come to see it, I believe that they will see themselves reflected in these Women and in your re-envisioning of the production.

**SB:** I think what we're trying to do, I know part of the original concept, is that when the Women come through that last ritual and they find god in themselves and love her and love her fiercely. That starts very intimately and builds and then takes over the entire house. So, for example, at that moment the entire audience will be washed in a rainbow of light, depending on where you are in the theater, you'll be red or you'll be blue or you'll be yellow and you'll be able to look at everyone else and see the divine reflected in the other person near you. So certainly, we're trying to do that to welcome them into the story.

We have some moments when the artists leave the stage and enter the house and really testify. Which I think invites audience participation. There're a couple actors who are directly interact with audience members at various moments throughout the play. But in terms of how we surround the play for processing. We've got some things that we always do, post play discussions and bookends where people can come in and prepare to see the show, see it on their own time and then return for a conversation. The study guide, of course, is absolutely something that people always look forward to from Penumbra. Because it just helps them understand the world and how important this piece is.

**SB:** I'm really interested to see what happens in post-play discussions. I plan to attend them. I like to listen. I don't think I'll facilitate them, because I think it's a point where you've got to hand it off but I do want to listen and hear what people have to say.

**TMD:** I think so much of your work, Sarah, as a social justice activist is about creating a culture of empathy. In what ways do you think *for colored girls...* helps you meet those ends to continue on the journey of bringing people to greater understandings of themselves?

**SB:** I mean this play just requires it. It just requires that you bear witness to one another and to the divine within another person. To the power and potential within another person. To the pain that people have experienced. But that you don't stay stuck in it. That you've got to move beyond it. It's wonderful practice. It's a wonderful practice place. It's tested me too.

**SB:** It's one of those plays where you're like, "Yep I've got it." Then you go back through it and you go, "Whoa. We just dropped a little bit, we dropped deeper into this." So that's been wonderful instruction.

It teaches you more and more how to be human.

**TMD:** Yes, "how to be human". You're making me think of an interview with Ntozake Shange when she said, "I have a right to think and feel what I want, and I can't stop feeling what I feel. Writing with me is a visceral thing. I have to get certain things out or I will get sick, I will cry. I will become catatonic. I don't have a choice."

**SB:** Wow.

**TMD:** Yes, isn't that powerful? And it made me wonder, has directing this piece been a visceral experience for you?

**SB:** Yes, certainly. I know when things are right. I get chills all over my body. I'm like, "Oh, I got the good chills. Okay we're keeping that."

And it does feel like something bigger is communicating with me at that time.

**SB:** You know, it's interesting that quote that you shared. I shared a quote with the company early on in the process, we were talking about the difference between Western white male philosophy and what black Womanism brings for us to consider and you know Rene Descartes, the Cartesian cogito, "I think therefore I am," and Audrey Lorde saying, "The white fathers told us: I think therefore I am. The black goddess within each of us—the poet—whispers in our dreams: I feel, therefore I can be free."<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Foster, Kimberly. "5 books by audre lorde everyone should read." For Harriet. 14 September 2018, <http://www.forharriet.com/2014/02/5-books-by-audre-lorde-everyone-should.html>

**TMD:** Ashé!

**SB:** So, I was like, that's the space in which we're working. It's not about thinking yourself out of being. We're not afforded that privilege. Women are deeply—women of color—are deeply embodied. We're race-marked and marked by gender. As we move through that, you know, when Zake says, "Being alive and being colored and being a woman is a metaphysical dilemma I haven't conquered yet." That's what they're talking about.

**TMD:** It's true. It's true. You're absolutely right, it is. Do you think that that's one of the reasons that this choreopoem has retained its vitality over the years?

**SB:** I do, I do. Yeah. Absolutely.

**TMD:** And I was wondering, if you could interview your father about his take on the director's craft, would it be?

**SB:** Well ... You know, I think the thing that I'm really interested in from an artistic perspective is, he's so ... like I said, he's a master director with certain kinds of drama but with this choreopoem he said, "I don't get it, but it's working. It's beautiful." I think he does get it, Theresa. I think he just hasn't found the words for it. I would want to know, what are your words? How would you describe what's happening here in this scene? What does it mean for you as a man to witness these Women doing this? Yeah, because he trusts it and it makes sense, but I think he hasn't quite brought himself to it in the way that the women have been invited to. So that's what I'd be curious to hear him talk about.

**TMD:** Wow. Thank you. Lou told me, he thinks that this production has an expressionistic quality about it. Then he talked about engaging Black audience members after watching a non-realistic piece. He said, the majority of the patrons will say, "Oh I don't get it." but he said, "Oh I believe they got it, because when you talk to them you realize they got it exactly."

So as you said, your father would say, "I don't get it." but he, like the patrons he mentioned earlier, really does get it.

**SB:** That's so interesting.

**TMD:** Oh, I am so, so excited. So excited to see it. At the National Black Theatre, with the late Barbara Ann, the performers weren't considered actors, but liberators. In their performance training they used the technique of "Five Cycles of Evolution". Ms. Teer said of the cycles and their labels: "The revolutionary is the highest, the most evolved of all the cycles. For in this cycle you deal with the spirituality of blackness. You know who you are, what you have to do, and you simply go about quietly doing it." And I think

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about that description when we deal with the spirituality of blackness or colored-ness, for colored girls, but also the spirituality of woman-ness and also of the divine and the goddess self. Here's my question: what do you find this piece has called you to do, to simply go about "quietly doing it?" What has been activated or re-activated in you as a revolutionary?

**SB:** Wow that is a profound question. Thank you for that.

**TMD:** You're so welcome.

**SB:** I think leaning with trust into my artist self has been something I'm very grateful to do and it feels like I'm being called home to a place that I chased myself away from because it was vulnerable and it was not quite as ... you know, I did very well in the academy because I understood the rules. Artistry is different. There is no rubric. There's no certainty. You create and then something is and then, you make it better as you rehearse it. I think that being called home to my artist self has been very profound.

**SB:** Anywhere I go, because of this piece, I am feeling much more tender toward children. Toward what they experience and what adults, either because of their own clutter in their minds and their hearts and in their everyday world, subject children to. I'm also profoundly aware of the resiliency of children. I just am so, I'm in love with women of color and just want all of us to be ... just to witness ourselves and to witness one another with love.

We were talking about the Serena, Naomi match in rehearsal and how both of those women were subject to sexism and racism and that's what had both of them crying up on that podium for the ceremony. I said to the women last night, I said, "you may feel the tears come as you're doing this play, and that's okay. But you cannot stay there. This is not a play about women suffering. This a play about survivors triumphing. I don't want to see you suffer. There's a defiance and an 'I dare you judge me for it. You try living in this.'" That just changed the second run. Because I was like, this is not ... there's a commercial venture in seeing people of color suffer. That's not what we do at Penumbra...we're not going to capitalize on that."

**TMD:** I appreciate that. You all, as Shange says, are going to move to ends of your own rainbows. I was on the phone yesterday with a friend, and she asked me, "Do you know the biblical significance of the rainbow?" and I had remembered, you know, as a child reading in the Bible and the covenant that God made with Noah. That that will never happen again. God would never flood the whole Earth again. That suffering, that flood, that killing off ...it was done. That rainbow is the covenant. It is the sign. It is the promise.

When I began to think about the second part of the title, "When the Rainbow is Enough" that's when I thought the promise is enough. When the hope for tomorrow is enough. When you realize the fact that Shange tried to kill herself several times. The most



violent of it being when she drove her Volvo into the Pacific. And still, she was not able to accomplish that and end her life. It's because she was divinely protected and destined to write this choreopoem. Better was coming and I believe at a soul level, she knew the rainbow was enough.

**SB:** I have chills everywhere. The good chills.

**TMD:** I thank you all for delving so deeply into the spirituality of this piece and embracing Shange's philosophy of the choreopoem. Elizabeth Brown-Guillory, says that this piece reflects or echoes the sentiments of women everywhere, and of every race, who have experienced the traumas that Shange details. Did you have that in mind when you decided to cast, multi-racially and multi-ethnically for this production?

**SB:** Yes. Absolutely. I think we ... I mean for me, as an artistic director, what I was really after is like "okay, let's look at the way women of color have held each other up and supported each other". Not to flatten out difference and make us all be the same, but to acknowledge, there's something very unique about being marked by both gender and race and probe that together.

Especially right now in this era of Trump. You know, when people have embraced all kinds of their privilege without really considering it. Just taking it because they've been invited to. How certain people, they don't have those privileges available. We need to deal, in a very real way, with the strategies that help us survive, that is about community and finding your kinfolk and understanding that they may be in Japan or Korea or South Africa or Brazil. Again, not to flatten out a difference.

I think we've leaned very heavily into the realities of the difference between being a black American and being a Korean American, or someone who identifies solidly as mixed race as one of our actors does. But women of color all over the world have had to sustain, I think, some of the deeper contours of feminism and fighting sexism and patriarchy and white supremacy. It's just really profound for us all to be together.

**SB:** I looked up at the room the other night, at all of these artists around me. Every single one a person of color, and I thought how grateful I was for that room. And how rare those rooms are, where the artistic leadership, the producer, the seasoned artists, the choreographer, the directors, the company, half of the design team...I was just like, "this doesn't happen". This does not ... what a safe space it is because of that. You know, Theresa, that's not assumed. Of course, people of color can hurt each other all the time but we were able to be more open to each other faster, I think, because of our shared experiences and where we connect.

**SB:** I feel a tremendous gratitude to be able to do this. How very necessary this is for our human survival. That we can practice being human together in these epic ways that art invites us to. That people can come and bear witness to what's been created with such

courage and valor. Hopefully, it invites them to be more courageous and more brave and more authentic too.

**TMD:** Oh. That is an amazing way to pause our conversation. Thank you, thank you.

**SB:** Thank you, Theresa.

**TMD:** Thank you. Sarah. I appreciate your generosity of spirit and your willingness to discuss the production. I'm very grateful. Thank you.

**SB:** Oh, it's such a joy to connect with you.

**TMD:** Best wishes for a wildly creative and productive tech and preview process. I trust you will witness many more miracles. The best is yet to come...

### **The Orishas**

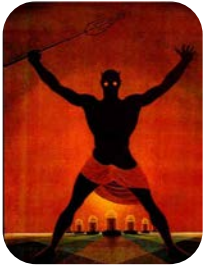
The Orishas are the emissaries of Olodumare or God almighty. They rule over the forces of nature and the endeavors of humanity. They recognize themselves and are recognized through their different numbers and colors which are their marks, and each has their own favorite foods and other things which they like to receive as offerings and gifts. In this way we make our offerings in the manner they are accustomed to, in the way they have always received them, so that they will recognize our offerings and come to our aid.

The orishas are often best understood by observing the forces of nature they rule over. For instance, you can learn much about Oshún and her children by watching the rivers and streams she rules over and observing that though she always heads toward her sister Yemayá (the Sea) she does so on her own circuitous route. Also observe how the babbling brook and the flash flood reflect her changeable moods. As you observe the orishas at work in the world and in your own lives you will gain a better understanding of them and their ways.



#### **Babalu Aye / lady in brown**

Babalu Aye is the Orisha who reigns over all matter related to health, physical and spiritual. Babalu Aye is the protector of the sick, the weak, the hurt, the injured. Traditional colors are brown and earth tones and his number is seventeen.



### **Shangó / lady in red**

Perhaps the most 'popular' of the orishas, Shangó rules over lightning, thunder, fire, the drums and dance. He is a warrior orisha with quick wits, quick temper and is the epitome of virility. He is married to Obba but has relations with Oyá and Oshún. He is an extremely hot blooded and strong-willed orisha that loves all the pleasures of the world: dance, drumming, women, song and eating. He is ocanani with Elegba, meaning they are of one heart. His colors are red and white and he recognizes himself in the numbers four and six. He is most often represented by a double headed axe.



### **Svādhiṣṭhāna / lady in orange**

Svādhiṣṭhāna (Sanskrit) is the second primary chakra according to Hindu Tantrism. It means "one's own base", or sacral chakra. Chakras are energy centers with a living pulse. Although the sacral chakra is primarily considered the sexual energy center, it is also the center where individual creativity resides. The location of the Sacral Chakra is the lower abdomen and the color is orange.



### **Oshún / lady in yellow**

Oshún rules over the sweet waters of the world, the brooks, streams and rivers, embodying love, fertility. She is the youngest of the female orishas but retains the title of Iyalode or great queen. She recognizes herself in the colors yellow and gold and her number is five



### **Ogún / lady in green**

Ogún is the god of iron, war and labor. He is the owner of all technology and because this technology shares in his nature, it is almost always used first for war. As Elegba opens the roads, it is Ogún that clears the roads with his machete. He is recognized in the number seven and his colors are green and black.



### **Yemayá / lady in blue**

Yemayá lives and rules over the seas and lakes. She also rules over maternity in our lives as she is the Mother of All. Her name, a shortened version of Yeyé Omo Eja means "Mother Whose Children are the Fish" to reflect the fact that her children are uncountable. All life started in the sea, the amniotic fluid inside the mother's womb is a form of sea where the embryo must transform and evolve through the form of a fish before becoming a human baby. In this way Yemayá displays herself as truly the mother of all. She, and the root of all the paths or manifestations, Olokun is the source of all riches which she freely gives to her little sister Oshún. She dresses herself in seven skirts of blue and white and like the seas and profound lakes she is deep and unknowable. In her path of Okutti she is

the queen of witches carrying within her deep and dark secrets. Her colors are blue and clear.



### **Oyá / lady in purple**

Oyá is the ruler of the winds, the whirlwind and the gates of the cemetery. Her number is nine which recalls her title of Yansa or "Mother of Nine" in which she rules over the egun or dead. She is also known for the colors of brown, dark red or multi-colors. She is a fierce warrior who rides to war with Shangó (sharing lightning and fire with him) and was once the wife of Ogún. She is the orisha of change.



### **Ìbejì / the children**

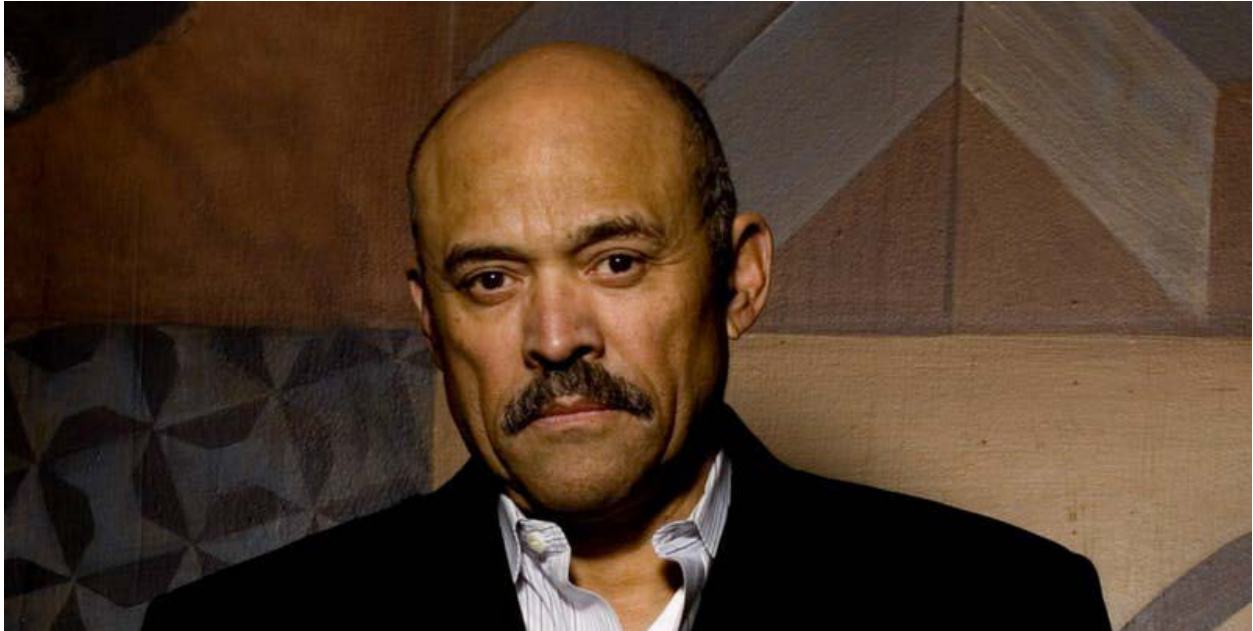
Ìbejì are African child deities of youth and vitality. Also known as the sacred twins; one male and one female. They are divine twins and considered as one orisha. The Ìbejì are considered one soul ("ori" in Yoruba with two bodies, inextricably linked in life through destiny. The Ìbejì are the orishas of joy, mischief, abundance and childish glee. They are the children of Shangó and Oshún. One Ìbejì holds the energy for the human personality and the other holds the energy for the spiritual personality. So, each twin needs the other and cannot function with balance, without the other.

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## A Conversation with Lou Bellamy

Co-Director, *for colored girls who have considered suicide / when the rainbow is enuf*



*"I think we have to take the responsibility for our culture, its expression, our literature, the ethos that is publicly shown for us...we must do that."* —LOU BELLAMY

When Lou Bellamy was honored by the McKnight Foundation in 2006 as the Distinguished Artist of the Year, his daughter Sarah Bellamy wrote: *"I wish more Americans had the opportunity to work beside their parents. It might make us appreciate our history and heritage more. More important, it is a gift to engage a parent through the lens of his or her true passion. My relationship with my dad is so nuanced, I've come to understand him as a father, a husband, an artist, an educator, a director, a founder, an advocate, a commentator, a prankster, a problem solver, an ambassador, an interlocutor, a leader, a fundraiser, and an elder. And I see now the sacrifice he's made so that I can live a good life. He often says, 'Don't underestimate the power of one life lived well.' What an example he's set."* More recently, Sarah said to me, "My father would never say this, but he is a master director." I can attest to that as we discussed art as life and many topics in between. When I asked, 'is this was a good time to talk?' Lou Bellamy, master director and man of action responded, 'let's get this, we can do this, I just wanted to get where it's quiet...Alright, now I'm all set.'" Well readers, are you all set? Because here we go...

—THERESA M. DAVIS

TMD: How are you doing today?

LB: So far, so good. A lot can go wrong yet.

TMD: True. But, I love where you are in the process right now. This is a magical time—the week before a show opens.

LB: Yeah, yeah, it's pretty cool, and there's a lot of promise and still work to do, so it's cool.

TMD: Thanks for taking the time to talk to me about Penumbra Theatre's production of *for colored girls who have considered suicide /when the rainbow is enuf*. Do you remember the very first time you saw the original production?

LB: Well, I've seen several productions of it, and I knew a lot of those women. I know Zake, I talk with her, and I've talked with her about our production. When I was running the company, there was this event that happened at Dartmouth College. It was called "On Golden Pond", and it was a reaction to August Wilson's "The Ground on Which I Stand".

TMD: Yes, I'm familiar...

*Note to readers about "On Golden Pond": "As advocated in Wilson's address ["The Ground on Which I Stand"], black theater scholars, practitioners and supporters convened the summit "On Golden Pond" in March 1997, near Dartmouth College in Hanover, New Hampshire. The goal of this summit, as well as a strategy within Wilson's TCG speech, is not only the reaffirmation of black theater but the reorganization of American theater particularly in terms of economics; to create a black theater that is not only viable but self-sufficient. Over three hundred black theater scholars, theater practitioners, economic entrepreneurs and community activists, all came together to discuss the future of black theater.<sup>11</sup>*

LB: Well, I was there, and Zake was there, and she admonished me for running a black theater and not finding people of color, black people, wherever they are in the world, black people who speak Spanish, French, and all that sort of stuff, in the diaspora. And I was a little xenophobic, I guess. Now, it sounds, as I discuss it, as something bad, or painful, but it wasn't. She was just saying, you've gotta recognize this, she certainly does in *for colored girls*. It reflects the diversity of the colored, if you will, experience. And so, I came back from that meeting changed, for many reasons. It was there where we really got into who we are and what it is we think we're doing and so forth. Anyway, that experience is reflected in the casting of this show. I'm co-directing it with my daughter [Sarah Bellamy]. And really, to be honest with you, I'm assisting her, if that makes sense. The style of this is expressionistic..., and my [directing strength] is realism and naturalism, so I try to bring that part into it.

Those women that developed the original piece, Zake, Trazana, [Paula, Risë, Aku, Janet, Laurie, Seret]...they changed American theater. There was no such thing as a choreopoem until Zake came up with it. A lot of people have claimed the form since, but she's the one that not only created it, but demonstrated its theatricality and power. And I think that PTC's choice of producing the show now is apropos. It is important that cultural institutions take the responsibility for revisiting and reinterpreting classics. Black culture is so adaptable and able to create both new forms and new styles. Black theater can and should act as cultural stabilizer. No one can stop time and we will move on to the next popular thing. ...I don't know. Black culture is so creative that it bubbles up new art forms, styles, and music. We created the blues, so okay, we've done that, let's move

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<sup>11</sup> O'Hara, Robert, and Harry Elam. "Getting the Spirit". *The fire this time: African-American plays for the 21st century*. New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2002. xiv. Print.

on to the next thing. It is the responsibility of institutions to re-examine those classic artistic statements, and show their relevance and beauty today. To point out that there's a continuum. A continuum that depends upon its very existence that black people own and understand. Or, it will be wiped out. And so, with *for colored girls*, we can't say, "We've been there, done that!" Young girls and women giving breath to N'tozake Shange's powerful poetry speaks as loud, or louder, than it did when the play was originally produced.

**TMD:** I was wondering if you would talk a little bit about the reimagining of this production of *for colored girls*...

**LB:** For me, it began again with Zake, and I remember asking her once, why she wrote FCG..., what was on her mind? And she simply said, "I just wanted those little colored girls to know we were thinking about them...that we care." So that was the beginning. Then when Sarah and I were discussing concept... what to do with the show... how we might focus on those little colored girls. We thought we could clarify how all those women, ancestral spirits, who came before them are looking at them and care about them. We wanted to demonstrate that the women who came before the present generation left life lessons and markers that can be used to navigate life and womanhood. We wanted show the efforts of female ancestors to equip the next generations with the tools to move through the world. ... a culture that would enable them to survive and thrive. That was the genesis of our approach to it, finding a way to acknowledge that continuum, and reason for doing the work.

**TMD:** Yes, and this piece most definitely shares, as Paul Carter Harrison would say, the African Continuum of Sensibilities<sup>12</sup>—

**LB:** Oh, you know your stuff, don't you? You know Paul. Good, good, good. Did you read *Drama of Nommo*?

**TMD:** Yes, I'm familiar with the work.

*Note to readers about "The Drama of Nommo":* Playwright Paul Carter Harrison discusses the presence of traditional African Thought and spirituality in everyday American life and cites the need for drama that explores the black experience.<sup>13</sup>

**TMD:** I'm wondering, as you and Sarah are co-directing, what particular influences are you conscious of carrying into the rehearsal room?

**LB:** Well, a world view sort of emerges as you begin to experience different things. You think, for example, when you're young you know it all, and you're inventing all these things for the very first time. Well, it turns out most of the time that is more ignorance than inventiveness. So, when you begin to find out that the continuum that Paul is talking about exists and that we are building on it and there is power in ritual and reenactment, it begins to build on itself.

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<sup>12</sup> Hatch, James. "Some African Influences on the Afro-American Theatre." *The Theatre of Black Americans* 1 (1987): 27.

<sup>13</sup> Harrison, Paul Carter. *The drama of nommo*. Grove Press, 1972.

**LB:** You've got to study these folks. You can't just look at them, because often what you're looking at is not what's going on. That's what "signifyin'" is about. So, when Sarah speaks with me, I know that she's had this wide experience of studying the right people (black people), and being exposed to the right things so that when she says something, I go like, "Oh, I see where you're ... yeah, I never looked at it quite like that." So, I don't know that it is a specific piece of wisdom but rather a world view that has been constructed by understanding the culture and the beauty from within. It's about using the right sources so that you don't inadvertently recreate these abnormal anomalies that seem to define the dominant culture's perception of blackness and the psychoses or neuroses that many (intentionally and unintentionally) portray. And you can unwittingly do that quite easily, so I guess it's that ... all that stuff.

**TMD:** No, it is that you both are truth-tellers, and I appreciate that, going beyond the stereotype and delving into who we are. When I read the concept for the production, it, stated *"The Women are ancestors and goddesses. They once lived earthly lives and now hover around [three little girls] offering wisdom, protection, inoculation, a sense of continuity and a connection to the divine. The diving is in each of the Women."* What do you think of this particular approach to the choreopoem?

**LB:** For me, it's quite touching and really does work. We need those rituals and those ways of acknowledging the passage through different parts of our lives. The larger society, doesn't offer much of that... what [Zake has] created, when she brings about these rituals...for instance, that last refrain, "i found god in myself & i loved her/ i loved her fiercely...", I've used that line in my university classes and just started around the room, and said "You say it, now you say it", and we go around the room with 10 or 15 people in the room...everyone is almost in tears and many are because Zake has captured something, she has given us a window into something that is metaphysical that I don't know how to describe... but when you experience the lines with Sarah's blocking, you see each woman come to a realization inside herself. We, as the audience witness it but they also see it in the other women as they repeat it. I don't know what to say, but the atmosphere... the world is changed by that recognition. I think we are the most human when we perceive this humanity in others who may be very different than ourselves. And because of the [intentional multi-racial/ethnic/cultural] casting we've done. You've got women looking at each other, and saying- "I see you, and I see your women-ness, your humanity. I see God in you."

And it's unbelievably powerful.

**TMD:** I've heard you say, "the work of theatre is a type of evangelism". How do you personally navigate the act of building cultural bridges and helping people to find themselves in others?

**LB:** Well, I bring my history into the room the same as everyone else does, and I know the way plays are shaped, I know how to get the most out of the medium, to manipulate the medium; to use it to say what I want it to say; or to help my daughter say what she wants so say. What a director does is tell an actor what they look like--how they fit into the whole. You see, actors can't see themselves,



and so I bring another view point or perspective into the room. I help and actor personalize the text. See themselves in it. We all, we're part of this world, and the mistake we often make about art is that it is somehow different than life. I would maintain that art is life, so we don't change who we are when we walk into the theater. We bring everything with us, and it's a continuum that I really love, and these women are talented and loving and giving. They take my direction, and take the good out of it, and if I err and say, "you know, something doesn't ring true" to them, they aren't shy about saying, "No, that isn't what that is!" ...and that's cool, because that's the way we all learn. It's an expected part of the process. It's respectful.

**TMD:** Yes, it is. And as you're talking about the women, about working with your daughter Sarah, I sense such a love and a respect, and I would like to ask you to talk a little bit about the choice to co-direct. I know you've worked as co-artistic directors, what's it like to work as co-directors, or as you say, to assist in her directing?

**LB:** Well, at this point in my life, I've figured a lot out about the medium, about plays, the stage, and how to use it. And I have something, I think, to give and to say, and it's important ... that's why Penumbra established its archives, so that people can go in there and build on what I might have accomplished. August Wilson says, "I'm standing in my grandfather's shoes". And I love that, because I have walked a little bit, I've traveled a little...and so, it's almost like stepping into the role of an evangelist. I'm trying to travel around and do this work with other people, with younger people, so that they can see the power of theatre, and the majesty of it, the beauty of it. Just witnessing what [Sarah] created when the ensemble brings about this ritual, specifically that last refrain,...it conjures... they bring it to you, you know, and you're changed by that. When you say, "i found God in myself and i loved her, i loved her fiercely," the world is changed by that recognition. You cannot openly encounter art like *for colored girls*... and not be changed.

**TMD:** What do you find most life affirming about black theatre today?

**LB:** Well, I think that possibly... not possibly, for sure, the most powerful purveyor of style and culture in the world is black culture. I really believe that. I go to London and I see people, people walking with a little bit of dip and so forth. It's powerful stuff. Paul Carter Harrison understands it, and he understands the need for staying close to it. You must be renewed by the cultural experience. Harrison cautions that you can't get away from it too far. What does he say...and I'm paraphrasing, "A brother should always keep the drum in his heart, if he doesn't, he may miss the A train and his ride home."<sup>14</sup> So, the informed black theater artist uses this art to change the world. That's the way they ... exercise their

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<sup>14</sup> Harrison, Paul Carter, et al., editors. *Black Theatre: Ritual Performance In The African Diaspora*. Temple University Press, 2002. JSTOR, [www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt14bs6rh](http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt14bs6rh).

citizenship, the way in which they confront life. It's an order almost ... well, it is a religion—a spiritual experience of sorts.

**LB:** Let me give you an example... When we were at the Summit On Golden Pond, an argument broke out between two individuals that threatened to sort of infect the entire process. The argument was so intense that it seemed to cast a pall over the entire gathering. Well, the next day, we got up in the morning, and Zake ... this is the way she used art to affect life—it isn't a separate process! She said, "I'm sick of this (*expletive deleted*)!" She got up and she took a broom...I swear to God, I've never seen anything like this in my life, she took a broom, and began sweeping [out the negative energy]. She got all up in all the corners of the ceiling...she got all that out, and got it on the floor, and swept it, she swept that negativity right on out the door. Idris Akamoor played his saxophone and tap danced it right on out of the room. You could just see it rolling out the door. I'm telling you...art is life! That was a play! A healing ritual! And we all got down to the business of Black Theater! It was the single most inspirational moment of my career.

**TMD:** I see what you're talking about, that's what this choreopoem does, it cleans house. Ntozake Shange cleans house. You mentioned before, she speaks these truths, that at times are not always comfortable. She's willing to say, "I am not gonna put up with this (*expletive deleted*)", and then goes about the work of cleaning it up because it is one thing to say that I'm not dealing with it, but it is another thing to roll up your sleeves and get in the trenches and work.

**LB:** Yes, ma'am.

**TMD:** Thank you for that story.

**LB:** I've never told anyone that's outside of there that story, so that's ... and that happened. You talk with any of the people who were there, they'll tell you about it.

**TMD:** When the original choreopoem opened on Broadway, I've heard it said there were some who found the choreopoem an attack on them.

**LB:** But you know, that was created as a marketing device...that particular kind of opposing relationship and man-bashing... that was created by Joe Papp and the marketers to sell the piece. It was a marketing strategy; the play was not anti-male. Those women weren't out there to crucify black men. I know that you know that. You know how black women have been holding up black men, that was not what that is about. And it's interesting that pro-womanhood can be perceived by some as anti-man. I know, when you see this production, you'll witness the love and so forth. Now it is true that the women tell some truths that need to be said, but it isn't ugly, it isn't meant to down or be anti-man. I don't perceive it that way, and I'm certainly a black male, and I've been in the rehearsal room with these women and Zake's text goin' on a month and a half and I've taught the piece for, I don't know, 25 or 30 years.

- TMD:** Earlier you mentioned beautiful line, “i found God in myself...” Are there any other lines that resonate deeply with you?
- LB:** Oh, just so many... *“being a woman & being colored is a metaphysical dilemma/i havent conquered yet”*
- TMD:** That’s a great line.
- LB:** Some of the stuff that bubbles up with the lines, I find very hurtful. For example, when I see black women being afraid...the poem “i usedta live in the world”. Just hearing these women talk, “somebody almost walked off wid alla my stuff”. In that poem, I believe Zake admits to sharing in the responsibility for what happened. She [the lady in green] said, “i didn’t know i’d give it up so quick... it was a lover that I made too much room for”. August Wilson comes to the same conclusion in the last act of *Fences*, when Rose says, "That was my first mistake. Not making him leave enough room for me."
- TMD:** Ntozake Shange has said there were people, after the Broadway opening, who asked her, why Oz Scott, directed the original production. She said, “a woman’s sense of vengeance would have surpassed the breadth of my work, so I had a man do it.” How do you view your role as the only male voice in the rehearsal experience?
- LB:** Well, you know, I directed, *Big White Fog*, the Theodore Ward piece, and I learned something in that piece. I had an actor, a male lead, who resisted direction. We did the play in a thrust configuration in a 1,200-seat house. And on the thrust, you've got all the rooms of the house on stage, it isn't just presented in the living room. So, all these men jump up there and say, “I'm gonna spend the boy's scholarship on the Black Star Line” and “Marcu Garvey...” and all this, and they run all that. Well, the play progresses like that and it's got a patriarchal sort of structure on the preceding. But on the thrust stage, with all the rooms present, that brother who said that stuff has to walk out of that living room and walk into the bedroom, or the den, or the kitchen, where his wife and it becomes a quite different story.
- So that’s what I learned from that, and the women in that piece ended up taking over the play, partly because of its male lead's unwillingness to go in the direction of the ensemble but also because of the physical structure of the space that gave those women voice because they were *there*. I learned from that experience to ask, “What are the women doing in this period? What's up with the women?” Because they're often not given voice. So when you ask those kind of questions, you come to different conclusions about the situation. When you put that on the stage, people go like, “Wow, I've never saw that before”. That's because no one asked a woman what she thought about it, and it truly changes the way the world of the play is structured, and the way we view things when you take that into account. It's something I learned from that play and bring to everything.
- TMD:** How do you think the audiences will respond to the non-realistic structure of the choreopoem?

**LB:** It's strange, since I've been in theater for so long, I will see audiences come out when we do an expressionistic piece, Adrienne Kennedy for example, and not many black theaters do that work. But when some do, black audiences will come out of it often, and you say, "Well, what'd you think?" They say, "I don't know, I don't know what that was about." And then you start talking with them, and they tell you exactly what it was about. It's so interesting, but that narrative isn't there for them, or isn't as clear, and they think they're lost in it, but they understand it totally.

These women, when you listen to them, you listen to Adrienne Kennedy, Alice Childress, or Lorraine Hansberry, and you can take a play as it is, discreet as a piece of art, but you can also understand that play in terms of the other plays and the experiences that the author has had...and bring an understanding and a meaning to it. When you are truly scholarly about the piece and understand how it fits in their lives and the black continuum and so forth, you find a depth in it. These writers haven't been frivolous. They're writing in a context that is their time, and so they're speaking to real life. Ntozake Shange is speaking to real life. These writers provide us with nothing short of a compendium of black intellectual thought.

**TMD:** As you know, the original production opened on Broadway, September 15, 1976. The original concept statement for this production reads, "...this show is centered around four little girls ranging in age from 10-15 years old. They have grown up together and are as close as sisters." September 15<sup>th</sup> also marks fifty-five years since the murder of the four black schoolgirls when a bomb exploded in the 16<sup>th</sup> Street Baptist Church in Birmingham. Was this in your or Sarah's mind when you decided to reimagine the choreopoem with little girls in the ensemble?

**LB:** It wasn't for me, but these things, ...what we find is, and often when I do shows people say, "How did you know that that was going to be happening and be relevant right this minute?" Well, of course the answer is that these things are always relevant and always important... you know what I mean? So, quite often, you sort of align with the universe, because you're aware of it, and sometimes you're just lucky enough to do that. For instance, I've done shows that have to do with police brutality, or the ripping off of culture and music, and monetizing it, and taking it away from the community. Well, these are things that go on consistently, so anytime you talk about them, it's gonna be relevant.

**TMD:** So true. Thank you for this time to connect. As our time together is coming to an end, is there anything else that you'd like to share?

**LB:** No, we covered a lot of ground. I'm talking about stuff I haven't talked about, so you're a wonderful interviewer. You've got me going. Thank you.

**TMD:** Thank you. You give a great interview. May I ask, where you're off to next?

**LB:** I leave for New York the Monday after opening to direct *Thurgood*.

**TMD:** The work of the master director continues...

## Reimagining the Rainbow

"Creation is everything you do. Make something." –ntozake shange



Ananya Chatterjea/ Choreographer

Vicki Smith/ Scenic Designer

Mathew LeFebvre/ Costume Designer

Drea Reynolds/ Sound Designer

Kathy Maxwell/ Lighting Designer

## Where There is Woman There is Magic

*"Where there is a woman there is magic. If there is a moon falling from her mouth, she is a woman who knows her magic, who can share or not share her powers. A woman with a moon falling from her mouth, roses between her legs and tiaras of Spanish moss, this woman is a consort of spirits." —ntozake shange*

## She Found God In Herself, She Found We: Performing Healing through Black Feminist Communion in *for colored girls...*

An essay by Kimberly J. Chandler, PhD

**Kimberly J. Chandler, PhD**, is a Gender and Communication Studies scholar, performance artist and educational consultant. A former Associate Professor of Communication Studies and Women's Studies at Xavier University of Louisiana, she is currently pursuing a new career path in Clinical Mental Health. Dr. Chandler continues her research focusing on gender performance and identity negotiation as well as tours her one-woman performance autocritography, *Confessions of an Ex-Superwoman*. A veteran of theater, her credits include classics such as *Eubie*, *The Amen Corner*, *God's Trombones*, *A Raisin in the Sun*, *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When The Rainbow Is Enuf* and *The Colored Museum*. As an activist-scholar, she continues speaking and consulting through her company, Chandler Education Solutions, LLC. While Dr. Chandler enjoys wearing many professional hats, her collective energies are always laser focused on encouraging and challenging people to embrace liberated living. For more information, visit her website at [www.KimberlyChandler.com](http://www.KimberlyChandler.com).

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### *i waz missin somethin*

As I sat in the waiting room of the hospital emergency room, all I could think was "There's no place to kill myself in here." Sitting among the various and sundry individuals who had come to be healed of what ailed them, all I wanted was out. If I couldn't get out of this life, I uselessly wished to relieve myself of a room filled to overcapacity. In my weary, racing mind, I kept running through my to-do list of papers to grade, lectures to prepare and assignments to finish posting. It really didn't matter that I'd just binged drank five bottles of wine and was brought to the emergency room by the kind taxi driver I routinely used when traveling to and from the airport for work travel. She, too, once engaged in an abusive relationship with a tall, white and handsome bottle of wine. She understood my call for "a ride just to get checked out at the emergency room because I felt really sick." I only went to the emergency room because I promised my mother I would go after I woke up on the other side of trying to leave life again. Damn! Again! There's no greater frustration than trying to leave, thinking you've left, only to wake up and find you're still here.

As I sat on the edge of the emergency room chair, rocking back and forth with extreme anxiety, a little girl with pig tails and bows in her hair walked up to me and stopped right in front of my knees. She was a petite little chocolate drop of a baby girl who looked to be no more than five years old. As if she'd

known me all of her life, she placed her little hand on my knee, looked me in the eye with the confidence of a grown woman and said, “You look sad.” I’m sure there were literally seconds between her next sentence, but it felt like years. It felt as if her pronouncement called something from the deepest cavern within my soul. She called it up, rushing like a fresh tide coming in to the shore, through my chest and up, up, up my neck, my throat, rushing throughout my entire head until I finally caught it. A few tears got away and leaked from my eyes, but with her little hand still on my knee, she smiled a million suns and said, “Don’t be sad. You nice.” And without a care in the world, she frolicked away.

### ***<sup>1</sup>Deep calleth unto deep...***

It would seem that an experience like that would immediately bring me out of my dark place, but it did not. I wasn’t in a dark place. I was numb. Like many of my SisterWomen, I learned very early in life how to keep moving until I had no other recourse. As the tears kept leaking from my eyes, her touch called me. Just like the despondent psalmist in the passage above, I felt as if I was in the throes of anguish washing over my soul in wave after wave. The psalm above reflects a metaphor using the imagery of billowing water so thunderously loud that each wave beckoned another wave to follow it to the shore. It was as if the deep were calling forth the deep. Pain called for agony and anguish called for heartache. Distress called for suffering and sorrow called for grief. The psalmist felt what I felt that day sitting in the emergency room with the little girl’s little hand on my knee. It was not her hand that called the tears to leak from my eyes. It was the authenticity of her touch born of pure love that called for the deep place in me. Her deep love channeled through a simple touch performed as a might voice calling, no bellowing to the deep pain, agony and grief that had ensconced my ‘strong black woman’ and silent suffering ‘mule of the world’ for decades. That small hand spoke loudly and the depths of my soul could not help but respond because deep calls to deep. Humans met with humane care will answer.

### ***a layin’ on of hands***

When Ntozake Shange wrote *For Colored Girls...* in 1975, she took us to the first line of her last poem before she called us to the deep. When experiencing the performance, we’ve been in Shange’s emergency room throughout every poem, every moment even of the timeless choreopoem. But, make no mistake: before the last poem we are invited into a *Black* woman’s triage! This is not an All Lives Matter moment. This is not even a Black Lives Matter moment. This is a Black WOMEN’S Lives Matter experience and it demands honor, respect and reverence. For Black women, it requires care and tenderness. It requires acceptance that is devoid of guilt, shame and judgment. It requires soft love. For all others, it requires acknowledgement and affirmation. It requires a personal query concerning your part in matter. How have you benefitted from what you behold? How has your life been made better at the expense of what you see in Shange’s emergency room? How do you still benefit from her, these souls shrouded in colors who all walk through the world Black and woman; your colored girls?

That day in the emergency room, I found I was missing a layin’ on of hands through the little hand of a chocolate girl with pigtails and ribbons in her hair. We Black women are often missing a layin’ on of hands; a deep touch that calls forth the ‘deep’ that is still ensconced in our souls. We deliver ourselves to the comfort of others while we wait to be reacquainted with our godself. We long to be in

communion with Goddess/God/Love/Truth/Highest Power in us, but find it challenging to get there because our SisterWomen have also delivered themselves to the comfort of others. We are all touching others, not ourselves. Shange's voice still bellows loudly, like the roar of mighty waves rolling powerfully to the shores of our consciousness. She still waits to triage us through each poem, each colored woman, embodying utterances that demonstrate our needs and longing. Each poem prepares us for her hands.

Why do we need Shange's *For Colored Girls...* now? As Black women, we must embody the communion of touch that calls forth the Strong Black Woman mythology's unresolved trauma. The myths and stereotypes that render us as superhuman and impervious to pain, yet inherently deviant continue their treachery on our collective consciousness. When the nation can sit idly by as our SistaWomen are treated in ways that harken back to the social agreements of plantation culture, one must listen – intently – for the roaring waters of the soul. As Black women, we must touch each other until we wake up the sound of our sorrow in order that we engage in the communion of healing. We must touch each other in order to meet the God in each other. When we meet the God in each other we will meet ourselves in each other. Each of us will be stronger because *We* will be stronger. This is the transformational power of touch. This is the nommo. This is the generative power of the spoken word through embodied utterance; it is our uniquely gendered, cultural performance of Divine black womanness. This is what the triage of Shange's emergency room produces for us today as Black women. In "Black Feminist Collectivity in Ntozake Shange's *For Colored Girls*", Soyica Diggs Colbert further characterizes this connection as follows:

bodies become conduits for producing social relationships. Instead of emerging as props in the social drama, the women, through touch, express feeling, cultivate community, confront pain, and engage in play and pleasure.<sup>2</sup>

What Colbert suggests is that touch becomes our divining rod, our compass that speaks into our deepest places, calling forth that which when exposed to love and light is transformed from pain to pleasure, from utter anguish to understanding. In that moment in an emergency room, a little chocolate baby girl touched my godself and I found her in me. And I started loving her. This is the nature of Black Girl Magic. It is our magic. It is uniquely ours to find in each other. And when we find her, we can love her – fiercely.

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<sup>1</sup>Psalm 42:7a in the King James Version of the Bible

<sup>2</sup>Black Feminist Collectivity in Ntozake Shange's *for colored girls who have considered suicide / when the rainbow is enuf* by Soyica Diggs Colbert Retrieved from <http://sfonline.barnard.edu/worlds-of-ntozake-shange/black-feminist-collectivity-in-ntozake-shanges-for-colored-girls-who-have-considered-suicide-when-the-rainbow-is-enuf/>



## A New American Writer Comes to Broadway

Notes from the original Broadway Cast Recording

by Nancy Heller

### a new american writer comes to broadway

Two years before Ntozake Shange's **for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf** became the dramatic hit of the Broadway season, before Newsweek said "this thrilling and poignant show should be seen by the whole country," before Clive Barnes of the New York Times wrote about "Ntozake Shange's totally extraordinary and wonderful evening" and her "beautiful, pungent, accurate writing," before New York Shakespeare Festival producer Joseph Papp gave **for colored girls...** a home at his off-Broadway Public Theater after co-producing it in an off-off-Broadway workshop at Woodie King Jr.'s New Federal Theatre, two years before all this happened, Ntozake Shange was living in San Francisco, teaching college students and giving readings of her poetry. She thinks of San Francisco as the place "where," she says, "everything hit. I was living in one of the most densely Third World populations in the country, an incredible women's movement, and the San Francisco poetry phenomenon." While there, she met Paula Moss, who became the choreographer and now performs in the show at a dance class. "Zake (Ntozake's nickname) had a reading to do one evening," Paula recalls "and said why don't you come along. Let's see how it works with dance and the poetry." Later, Ntozake added more poems for Paula to dance, and they called the evening "for colored girls who have considered suicide/but have moved to the ends of their own rainbows." "It was like a dream, the beginning," Paula says. "I can think back to when we were at Minnie's Can Do. People would come see us for \$1.50, and they could drink all the wine and beer that they wanted. And we would just feel good and have two or three hour shows. Zake loves that. If it was up to her, it would still be in a bar. But I've always wanted it in a theater." They both wanted to take it to New York, where Ntozake's sister, Ifa Iyaun, introduced her to Oz Scott. Oz, who was working as a stage manager at Joseph Papp's Public Theater and wanted to begin directing, suggested bringing in some actresses to work with Ntozake and Paula. Trazana Beverley, Laurie Carlos and Aku Kadogo were part of that first group. They rehearsed in apartments and lofts, and scrounged unofficial space at the Public Theater. Then there were two Sunday evening performances at Demonte's, a bar on the Lower East Side. Ntozake liked it there: "I had been working in bars so long, and I hated theater so much because it's so stuffy. I thought the bar was it." Oz wanted Joe Papp to see it. Papp couldn't make it to Demonte's but asked them to do it one afternoon at the Public Theater. "Then Joe was busy and wanted to reschedule," Oz remembers, "but I said no, we'd just do it." And Joe said he could only stay for twenty minutes. An hour and twenty minutes later, he was still there." "I was struck, first of all," says Papp, "with the honesty of the piece, and then impressed with its high flights of pure poetry intermixed to such a marvelous degree with down-to-earth, folk, black material. I felt very moved by the material. When some speaks something, says it out loud, and you're moved by it, that's the first law of the drama." Although Papp wanted to see the work developed as a theater piece, he had no immediate space available at the Public Theater. But he offered to underwrite most of the cost of a workshop production if Woodie King, Jr., producer of the Henry Street Settlement's New Federal Theatre, would do it there. King, who had seen the show at Demonte's, agreed. Thousands of people were turned away during the Henry Street engagement. Papp found the performance rough and in need of restructuring. Still, he decided, to produce it at the Public Theater. "I said yes, because it would give me more time to spend with it," Papp explains. "When it went into rehearsals here, we had several very strong sit-down meetings. They were doing a linear

story, starting with being a little kid and then growing up. It needed more juxtaposition of other things. I suggested total reorganization.” He also wanted to recast some of the actresses. Risë Collins and Janet League joined the company at the Public Theater. In rehearsals, Oz was the lone man among seven women, working with material which deals with the hurt, rejection and betrayal women have suffered in relationships with men. “This whole piece has to be done from the basis of love and an overall feeling of care,” Oz says. “Sometimes I would have the actresses use me as the man they were to play to. The reason you spend time and energy saying something to someone is that you love them.” Ntozake, who “really didn’t intend for any men to even see **for colored girls...** I wrote it for women,” explains why men are both producing and directing her work. “What was given up as a woman-centered perspective, and in doing that we gave men time to consider. A woman’s sense of vengeance would have surpassed the breadth of my work, so I had a man do it.” When **for colored girls...** opened at the Public Theater on June 1, 1976, the critics, mostly men, were emotionally overwhelmed and unanimous in their acclaim. A “This Performance Sold Out” sign was soon a permanent feature at the box office, and Papp considered a move to a larger house on Broadway in the fall. “I decided to take it to Broadway,” he says, “because I thought there was an audience for it. The ability of something of this nature to fill the Booth Theatre, 800 seats, each night, only speaks for its eloquence and dramatic impact. Its cry is a universal one. That’s what makes it so appealing. Zake has no prejudice. She recognizes the difference between black and white. She recognizes the imposition of white culture and economy on blacks. She is in one sense, as militant as anybody can be. But she’s an artist, which means that she will never avoid certain truths to make another kind of point.” Papp also feels that her work “upgrades the entire standard of Broadway,” and explains. “Right now it’s not just the only serious black work, and a woman’s work, but it’s the only serious American dramatic work on Broadway. And what makes it so important to me is that we’ve introduced the first work of a writer, also the first work of a director. This represents the best work of the Festival and describes what we do better than anything else. It means starting from finding the original work, cultivating it, nursing it, and then giving it to the world. We gave birth to another writer. That’s the greatest contribution we can make.”

### **“sing a black girl’s song”**

The stage is in darkness. Harsh music is playing as dim, blue lights come up. One after another, seven women run onto the stage. They all freeze. The Lady in Brown, Janet League, comes to life and introduces Ntozake Shange’s **for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf** with **dark phrases of womanhood**, a plea for “somebody/anybody” to gather the scattered half-notes of the discordant music, give them rhythm, a tune and “sing a black girl’s song.” The beginning of that song is **graduation nite**, performed by the Lady in Yellow, Aku Kadogo. Aku remembers herself at seventeen: “I was ready to conquer the world. You are ready to go at it! Here you are, young and sassy. There’s nothing in your way.” The Lady in Blue, Laurie Carlos, is next with her story about being sixteen and running off to the South Bronx to meet up with Willie Colon. The poem, **now I love somebody more than**, is Laurie’s favorite. “When I came across it,” she says, “I decided I really wanted to do this show, because Zake understood the mixture of Spanish and English.” Laurie grew up in a black and Puerto Rican neighborhood on Manhattan’s Lower East Side. Unlike the girl in her poem, she didn’t have to sneak into Slugs (a famous jazz joint). “I grew up in that place. I lived two blocks away. My father’s a musician. I’d come in and the people behind the bar, they’d just sit me on a stool and give me a ‘Shirley Temple.’” These two early poems capture the time of “movin from mama to what ever was out there.” As Ntozake explains, “**for colored girls...** is a record of me once I left my mother’s house. I was raised as if everything was all right. And in fact, once I got out of my house, everything was not all right.” This disillusionment is felt in **no assistance**, performed by the Lady in Red, Trazana Beverley. “It’s

just too much!" she laughs, thinking about the woman in her poem with "3 handmade notecards I left town so I cd send to you," and yet Trazana also says, "I don't think **no assistance** is funny." The Lady in Green, Paula Moss, is next with **somebody almost run off with alla my stuff**. "**Stuff** is such a beautiful piece," she says, "because it relates to everyone. When I come out, I just feel like, 'hey, now it's time to party. Let's boogie awhile. Let's have a good time. Let's talk about stealing our things.'" The final poem on Side One is **one**, which Trazana Beverley likes "because of its subtlety," and finds, "it lilt for me. She's such a beautiful character." There is a dream-like fantasy quality to this poem which creates a vivid image of a woman who has the power to conjure men. But in the end, she finds herself alone, just "a reg'lar colored girl."

The unbearable pain of reality is felt as Side Two begins with Laurie Carlos in a harrowing, visceral performance of **abortion cycle #1**. In all of these poems which explore the black woman's psyche, men are prominent figures. With **no more love poems**, the poet speaks directly to him of the pain and hurt she has kept inside. Ntozake Shange performs her own work in **no more love poems #1**. During rehearsals of the play, Joseph Papp remembers asking the other actresses to take a cue from her delivery "because she understood those lines better than anybody else. It was the attitude that was there, the slight pain in everything she said." Although these poems are divided among four women: **#2**—Risè Collins (Lady in Purple), **#3**—Laurie Carlos, **#4**—Aku Kadogo, they are really a continuation of each other. At the end of the series, Aku Kadogo says she "feels really empty. There are times when we're all alone. And in reality you are alone. But then there's always somebody who comes around and says, 'Aku, it's all right. I'm here.'" At the end of her poem, Aku is joined on stage by the other women and, in the final section of the play, they relate to each other, share their problems and trade their favorite "sorry" stories, culminating with Laurie Carlos in the poem, **sorry**. Rid of the redundancy of being "sorry and colored at the same time," the women (and the audience) are prepared to handle the devastating **a nite with beau willie brown**. It is performed by Trazana Beverley, an actress who says, "I really love to go all the way with stuff. It's a joy to get down in there and work it. If we can just touch that essence when we're performing, I think it's gold." One night, at the climactic end of the poem, she found herself at the edge of the stage. "One more step and I would have been in the orchestra," she recalls. The incident is a metaphor for her consummate performance in which she goes to the furthest reaches of her considerable acting skills and energy. On stage at the end of **beau willie**, she receives solace and comfort from the other women who begin **a laying on of hands**. Trazana describes the moment as "a cool shower." Risè thinks of it as "a merging of divinity and humanity." Janet connects "the realization of the spirituality of man" with a spirituality she discovered when she was eight and finds herself "getting back into it through working in this show." Laurie Carlos says, "I could not do this show night after night if it ended with **beau willie**. Through all the complications of what it's like to be a woman, to be black, in America, it's really so simple. There's you, and there's God. You can really move forward if you wait. It takes time, and love. Don't let the devil fool you." **for colored girls...** ends as the women sing the gospel-like **i found god in myself**. It recalls the first poem of the evening which asks "somebody/anybody" to:

sing a black girl's song . . .  
sing the song of her possibilities  
sing a righteous gospel  
the making of a melody  
let her be born  
let her be born  
& handle warmly

## Ntozake Shange is poet who. . .

"had written a lot since I was about eight, but never called it anything. When I was a child, I was vry fanciful. But for a while, everything stopped. In St. Louis I was transferred to a white school fifteen miles from my home, and the teacher told me not to write about colored children. In high school I wrote a paper about Malcolm X when he died, and the teacher told me I was beating a dead horse. But right around the same time, I took a course in modern French classics, which I enjoyed because it wasn't in English. That is when I started getting fanciful again. I had to write so that somebody would realize what my life is like. At college, a white girl on the literary magazine asked a black friend of mine to submit her poems. I was standing there, so she asked me too. For all she knew, I wrote diddley-squat. To me it was a great joke. But she took a couple of my poems, and they were printed. In a way, that was the beginning. While I was at Barnard I worked hard on black poetry and the development of black people's history in cities. And I did a lot of work on music. Then I went to graduate school at the University of Southern California and spent a year really giving myself a solid foundation in the history of black visual arts, theater, literature and dance so that I would have some idea of who had already done something, what they had said, and what I could say that was more coherent. People have found me to be oppressively disciplined. I write whenever I have to. As soon as the feelings come, I tear ahead and write. I stopped a class one night while was teaching because it was right there. I also keep a journal. I guess I'm almost maniacal about it. I write about anything that ever happened to me. What I want to do is just give someone another sensation. I don't understand much more than that I feel things. That's all that means something to me. I never thought anyone would understand me, so I always worked to make myself clearer, and I go to parts of myself which are unknown for that. The poems I picked for **for colored girls**. . . were the only poems I knew for sure would allow people to experience as much of life as possible. It is not a sad piece. It is not a light piece. It is not a sexist piece. It is not bitter. But it is all those things. I wanted all of that to be there. I didn't want any of them to overwhelm any of the others. I haven't been miserable for twenty-seven years, but I've been miserable some of the time. And that's there. Some of the good times are there. Some of the pensive moments. Some angry ones. I wanted to make it as full as possible so that there would be no mistake about the fact that we are alive. One day I was driving home after a class, and I saw a huge rainbow over Oakland. And I realized that women could survive if we decide that we have as much right and as much purpose for being here as the air and mountains do. We form the same stuff here that sunlight does. We are the same as the sky. We are here, breathing, living creatures, and we have a right to everything."

## this is the new York Shakespeare festival

The New York Shakespeare Festival, the foremost theater of the United States, has been under the dynamic leadership of Joseph Papp since its beginning as a Free Shakespeare summer festival in 1956. In 1964, the Festival developed a unique Mobile Theater to tour New York City parks and in 1967 converted a New York landmark building into the Public Theater, which opened with the original production of **Hair**. Intensely committed to the production of plays by American dramatists, the Festival has produced eighty-eight new plays in its nine years at the Public Theater. For network television the Festival has produced three distinguished dramatic special, **Much Ado About Nothing**, **Sticks and Bones** and **Wedding Band**. In 1973, the Festival was named theater constituent of Lincoln Center presenting the finest in new American works and a fresh approach to world classics at the Mitzi E. Newhouse and Vivian Beaumont Theaters. Among the Festival's productions which, collectively, have garnered six New York Drama Critics Awards, four Tony Awards and three Pulitzer Prizes are: **No Place to Be Somebody**, **Two Gentlemen of Verona**, **Sticks and Bones**, **That Championship Season**, **Short Eyes**, **The Taking of**

**Miss Janie, Streamers and A Chorus Line.** Like **A Chorus Line, for colored girls...** originated as an off-Broadway production at the Public Theater and later joined the Festival's hit musical on Broadway's Shubert Alley when it opened at the Booth Theatre on September 15, 1976.

**Joseph Papp and Woodie King Jr. present**

**"for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf**

**by Ntozake Shange**

directed by **Oz Scott** with **Trazana Beverley, Laurie Carlo, Risë Collins, Aku Kadogo, Janet League, Paula Moss, Seret Scott, Ntozake Shange** album score by **Bill Eaton** scenery by **Ming Cho Lee** costumes by **Judy Dearing** lighting by **Jennifer Tipton** choreography by **Paula Moss** music for "i found god in myself" by **Diana Wharton**; associate producer **Bernard Gersten. A New York Shakespeare Festival Production** in association with **The Henry Street Settlement's New Federal Theater.** produced for records by **Oz Scott, Herbert Harris, and Frank Kulaga**; orchestra, trumpet: **Wyman Reed**; saxes: **Hal Vic, Eddie Daniels**; keyboards: **Art Jenkins, Ken Barron**; guitar: **George Davis**; bass: **Ron Carter**; drums: **Grady Tate**; congas: **Ralph McDonald**; percussion: **Warren Smith**; timbale: **Reggie Ferguson**, recording consultants to the New York Shakespeare Festival **Herbert Harris** and **Gerald Widoff** for **Fiddler Enterprises Inc.** "Stay in my Corner" published by Conrad Music.

**"It will change your conscience and enrich your life!" Rex Reed**

*"This is true folk poetry. It springs from the earth with the voice of people talking with the peculiarly precise clumsiness of life. It is the gaucheness of love. It is the jaggedness of actuality...Totally extraordinary and wonderful! It made me feel proud at being a member of the human race."* Clive Barnes, *New York Times*

**A poignant, gripping, angry, and "Encompasses every feeling beautiful theater work!" and experience a woman has ever had.**

**"Bitingly alive! Ted Kalem, Time Magazine The whole performance seems inspired!" Edith**

**Should be seen by the whole country!"** **Oliver, The New Yorker** "Hits the heart, the mind, and lightning bolts of insight!" *United Press International*





## Shange as the Sankofa Spirit: What is *for colored girls*... saying to us today?



The Sankofa Asante Adinkra symbol means, “Go back and get it”. It is a word of the Twi language of Ghana [san – to return / ko – to go; fa – fetch]. Notice how the Sankofa bird, has its head turned backwards to glimpse the past, the feet face forward to move into the future and the body of the Sankofa is firmly in the present moment. In this picture, the Sankofa is seen with an egg in its mouth. In many cultures the egg represents the soul.

*“my spirit is too ancient to understand the separation of soul & gender” — Ntozake Shange*

*for colored girls who have considered suicide / when the rainbow is enuf* “celebrates the capacity to master pain and betrayals with wit, sister-sharing, reckless daring, and flight and forgetfulness if necessary. She celebrates most of all women’s loyalties to women.” — **TONI CADE BAMBARA**

On the twentieth anniversary of the Broadway Opening of *for colored girls who have considered suicide / when the rainbow is enuf*, a student presented me with a special gift, an autographed copy of the extraordinary choreopoem. On the second page, under the three-lined presentation of the title, written in purple ink was a command that I try—yet fall short—to live every day: “Theresa / Be Wondrous / Ntozake Shange / 1996. The presentation of that gift, catapulted me back to memories of my first experience with this profound and emotional text. It was as if I became an amended lyric in Roberta Flack’s moving melody *Killing Me Softly with His Song*, “[She] sang as if she knew me / In all my dark despair....” From the very first poem I felt Ntozake Shange’s words speak into me as the lady in brown pleaded: somebody / anybody / sing a black girl’s song / bring her out to know herself to know you / In those twenty poems, Shange was bringing me out—calling me out to know myself. Were there others who felt this way? These thoughts and questions inspired me to call on my wondrous-women-writer-friends to ask the question: What is *for colored girls who considered suicide / when the rainbow is enuf* saying to us today? I’m grateful for all those who answered the call, either in writing or in spirit.

—Theresa M. Davis/ i’m outside here/ there/ & everywhere

When I set out three decades ago for New York, I never realized what *for colored girls* was destined to become. I look back now with awe as gray slate clouds, ominous and dense, give way to a pastel prism of color dancing cross the sky. And I look forward to discovering even more colors to add to the rainbow that is this colored girl’s wonderful journey. Now . . . back to the beginning.

—Ntozake Shange (July, 2010)

On opening night September 15, 1976, I was backstage. My friend and songwriter, Diana Wharton invited me and together we bubbled with energy and anticipation as the play began. A founding member of Sweet Honey and the Rock, Diana had composed the music for the play including “i found God in myself.” In those days I was a playwright and poet, née Debbie Wood. A few years before, The Negro Ensemble Company had produced my play,



*Indiana Avenue* and, Diana and I had performed together as “Another Level,” a music and poetry duo. Backstage, I remember feeling the mounting excitement as the emotional power of Ntozake’s brilliant vision swept through the audience. I remember the actors in their swirling colors performing with all of their talents, professionalism, and big, big hearts in what felt like a call-and-response, religious experience. Seriously. It was that moving. It was magical. It was Church. It was us. Today, I’m a scholar-writer, an associate professor. Over the past 30 years in the academy, I have given away to my “hungry” adult learners more than a few copies of my *For Colored Girls*. In my courses on African American literature or Theatre and Society, I have used it to teach about our history and our journey as women and people of color. In my oral interpretation course, I have used *For Colored Girls* as an instructive text, one that I encourage learners to experience on stage, live, whenever they can. What I can depend on in each instance remains the function of the text as a bridge for all to cross, women especially, so that they reach some understanding, some heightened awareness of their connection to others different from yet so like themselves, but also on a deeper more resonant level, experience their connection to themselves. I share with them what it meant for me to witness history, but also what it means to be a witness to one’s growth, one’s coming to consciousness, one’s coming to love one’s self. *For Colored Girls* still gives us that. Ashé.

—Deborah (Debbie) Wood Holton / i’m outside chicago

*f*or colored girls who have considered suicide / when the rainbow is enuf still speaks. It allows you to rediscover and discover yourself. I believe we need forums to talk about this powerful work...to come to a better understanding about our lives. And historically, we must talk about what’s happened in the world from 1974 until now. We must keep searching for the things that help us to [move] to the ends of our [own] rainbows. Ntozake Shange was way

ahead of us when she wrote, “I found toussaint” and “i found god in myself & I loved her / I loved her fiercely”—when I first heard those words, I thought, “she’s speaking directly to me.”

—Val Gray Ward / i’m outside Chicago

*f*or colored girls who have considered suicide / when the rainbow is enuf is a birthright I always knew I needed, but hadn’t received. It is a rite of passage, a ritualistic cleanse, and reminder to pause and create space for profound healing. I don’t remember my first encounter with *for colored girls...*, but the choreopoem has traveled with me to multiple countries, even being stolen during my Peace Corps service, and has lived in my purse for the past month and a half. As I embarked upon a self-love fast in August 2018 with *for colored girls...*, malachite, citrine, and the holy spirit as my allies, Ntozake Shange reminded me that “my love is too beautiful to be thrown back on my face” and gave me permission to “glitter honestly.” *for colored girls who have considered suicide/ when the rainbow is enuf* speaks my life in ways I wish it didn’t. It empowered me to mourn and release the loss of dreams, innocence, and the woman I bled to become that were stolen through rape, and supplements my battle with depression with stories of survival. *for colored girls...* reminds me that God is within me, and I shall not be moved. Amen.

—ArDonna D. Hamilton/ i’m outside of washington, d.c.

*f*or colored girls... remains a necessary and relevant work of art for black women because we still need to be reminded of our goodness, our greatness, and our inherent worth. For all the increasingly regular invocation of “Black Girl Magic” these days, systemic racism ensures that our numbers are too low in the positive categories (learning outcomes, graduation rates, employment, and earning) and too high in the negative categories (school suspension, childbirth complication, and mass incarceration). *for colored*



girls... demands that black women and girls swim against the tide of hatred, bias, negative energy, that would consume us. Shange's words are a balm, a challenge, a recipe for black women: "I found god in myself & I loved her/I loved her fiercely." We need that in 2018 it seems, more than ever.

—Lisa Woolfork / i'm outside #charlottesville

**T**he metaphysical survival of the ancient ones ever present today in our trilogy of: "bein alive & bein a woman & bein colored a spirit too ancient to understand" or quiet.

—Saundra Whitley / i'm outside my "she shed" among my plants / candles / sacred stones & medicine wheel / incense & yellow flowers for Oshun

**I** don't remember the specific circumstances of my first viewing of "for colored girls" on stage. Was it 1975? Surely it was the mid to late 70s. What I remember thinking *then* was how shocking it was to hear the intimate voices of black women talking about their lives—out loud, in public. The stories, even the triumphant ones (like the Toussaint L'Ouverture story) were stories of loss. And I knew that the music and dance that carried the women into and out of their stories was as important as the words in the poems. The poem I looked for, after the performance, was the "lady in green" saying "somebody almost walked off with all my stuff..." That was the poem that I bought the book to get.

What does "for colored girls..." say to me today? Shange's women in their various colors remind me that the search for love and acceptance still sits at the core of our joy and sorrows. These stories structure around women telling the stories of loving/losing/needing/struggling with men (and the unexamined but potent problems of the men in their lives, and the neighborhoods where they grow up). The play ends with a child being dropped from a window and the women, in their colors, coming together, coming to each other for solace,

community. Shange does not reveal how this ending is achieved. That work is left to us still—to question inherited power relationships and look for the power, in ourselves, to define our joy, its secrets (thank you, Alice Walker) and embrace it.

—Opal J. / i'm outside atlanta

**I** had a lot of thoughts come to mind [with this question]. On Friday I was accosted by a mentally disturbed woman in the city on my way to an appointment. Now I was fine, but more shook. The lobby man witnessed and called the police and I didn't particularly want him to, only because this was a black woman. She's was dirty thin with a belly and barely dressed, she wasn't young and she yelled at me. She was filled with rage that had nothing to do with me. I wonder how did she got that way.

So, getting your email was ironic to me. For colored girls was a life changing play (most like colored museum and funny house of a negro) for me because it exposed the wounds of my soul in a way that I'd never encountered with such rawness and honesty. It was specific to me, a woman of color. It gave me the opportunity to show others what a piece my internal battle, struggles, and life looked like. It was a backstage look, if you will, to a peak of some of the why's of where our brokenness comes from. But it also encouraged a healing and empowerment that came from within, God, and sisterhood. It became a celebration of our scars and the perfection in them.

Ntozake Shange (as well as Adrienne Kennedy) inspired me to write my words as well. I felt that there was room for plays that originated from the poetic spoken word and abandonment of filters, but straight no-chaser truth. A break of rules of linear, but reminiscent to Yoruba Egungun tradition.

In celebration to [the]ladies who will take on the magic of for colored girls, I offer this with love:

"I"

*I was sown from a tapestry that originated in the golden hands of Kemet.  
Washed in purple waters draped in light.  
The abundance of greatness blown into each pattern with specific purpose.  
Giving birth without penetration.  
My heart touches through molten blazed sun fingertips  
This being is penetrative.  
Like X-men, only a chosen few.  
Mastery of the gift.  
I am earth with planted seeds fertilized by my grace  
Growth is inevitable.  
I am traditions and rituals stocked to preserve integrity.  
I am the skies infinite possibilities and the oceans vast ripples  
Flourished from the original designer  
I am the braveness of your skewed reflection but mirror your true beauty.  
Ideas are woven through me with tactile colors  
That my visions unify to a magnificent new dream discovered  
I am designed to be perfectly blessed as a blessing.  
I am first love excitement, rendezvous" passion, old lovers security.  
I am eyes of angel's awakened  
I am barefoot toes on the Sunday shore of calypso sands.  
I am ripened guava nectar sweetly delicious dripping from happy lips.  
Nourishing, I had the audacity to query.  
A defying of logic and not converted to the times  
I am the sultry flames of summer hidden in the color of warmth.  
The quiet diva in her lair of sandalwood and Egyptian musk  
Creating comforts and pleasures specifically catered.  
I am the sound of sun and moon kissing hello and goodnight  
Poured into my soul I was carved an extra serving of something  
Courageously special.  
I am laughter uncensored blaring and young.  
I am stillness in a whisper between palms that beg to touch.  
I am the heart of the lion and the temperance of the doves" indolent stroll.  
I am not vain kindness  
I am edifying minds as an example.  
I am preparation attributed to greatness.  
Heroism when the storm clouds try to break ship sails.  
I am all of God's best, compressed  
I am all of my humanly perfected flaws.  
I am the testimony to the strength of a woman.  
I am undoubtedly Love.*

—Suzette Azariah Gunn / i'm outside new york / outside any and all boxes

In the age of Black Girls Rock and MeToo, I think the choreopoem still has a profound message. The pain and the triumph that the play deals with are very much a part of the narrative now. The so called negative narrative surrounding black men in the light of Black Lives Matter is another complicating factor. Your job will be to convince those of us who have seen it at least three times on stage and once in the movies that the message is as necessary now as it was four decades ago.

—Joanne Gabbin / i'm outside harrisonburg

### Response #1 / Shange as Harbinger:

Shange's *For Colored Girls...* was a harbinger 40 years before the Me Too Movement, which arose not recently in Hollywood but by the efforts of Black activist Tarana Burke more than a decade ago.

Shange's ladies' voices have been gaining strength through those 40 years sounding after high school dances, on college campuses, and after the doors are opened and the men who were invited in as guests/friends.

the lady in blue: "a friend is hard to press charges against"

the lady in purple: it was "a misunderstanding"

the lady in red: "a rapist is always to be a stranger  
to be legitimate  
someone you never saw  
a man wit obvious problem"

The choreopoem quoted above can open any Me Too Rally and the roar of recognition will rise but with the hope that our baby daughters and their daughters will have a new choreopoem to dance and recite.

### Response #2 / Shange & the Rainbow:

James Baldwin quotes one source of the rainbow from a slave song in *The Fire Next Time* "God gave Noah the rainbow sign, No more water, the fire next time!"

"And God said: "This is the sign of the covenant which I make between Me and you, and every living creature that is with you, for perpetual generations: I set My rainbow in the cloud..."  
Genesis 9:12

The rainbow has a foundational place in *For Colored Girls...* the title embraces the rainbow when one might expect the rainbow *not* to be enuf if colored girls are considering suicide. The ladies consider suicide but choose to *live* and they repeat "I found god in myself & I loved her" that echoes the God of Genesis who offers to be loved and found inside.

Perhaps it can be said that the ladies at the end of the choreopoem enter a covenant with each other and their audiences. The last lines of stage directions state, "The ladies sing first to each other, then gradually to the audience. After the song peaks the ladies enter into a closed tight circle." The lady in brown seals the covenant with the final words: "& this is for colored girls who have considered suicide/ but are movin to the ends of their own rainbows."

**Response #3 / Toussaint Jones & Wakanda Lives!**

I can imagine the lady in brown meeting Toussaint Jones in 2018 so that he could ask her to go see the opening night of the Black Panther cause

"Toussaint jones waz awright wit me  
No tellin what all spirits we cd move  
down by the river..."

I can see him leaving the theater saying "Now that's what I'm talkin about!"

—Kathy Elaine Anderson / i'm outside washington, d.c.

I think at a time when black women are going missing, being jailed for defending themselves, and getting killed without consequence, all while mainstream America denies that it has anything to do with race or gender, if they acknowledge that it's happening at all, any play giving us voice is necessary. But ESPECIALLY this play. And I don't know how to feel about the fact that it never seems to go out of style.

—Chisa Hutchinson / i'm outside newark

*f*or colored girls... continues relevant; unfortunately, it is in many respects as much a picture of today as it was when it was written.

—Daryl Dance/ I'm outside richmond

I saw the original production of "for colored girls..." on Broadway in 1976 when I was in my last year of my MFA in Acting at NYU Tisch School for the Arts. The director, Oz Scott, had directed me in a short play that served as one of my Tisch auditions. Both Trazana Beverly and Robbie McCauley had been teachers of mine.

As an actor who hoped to make a living in the theatre, it was artistically affirming to see my teachers and colleagues work on a Broadway stage. As a budding playwright, experiencing Shange's language revolutionized my ideas of what dramatic writing could be. As a newly married black woman, I found the subject matter profoundly disturbing.

I grew up with adoring grandfathers, and a loving and attentive father who believed (and made me believe) that gender was no barrier to my ambitions. By 1976, I was two years into a marriage to a passionate, sensitive, and loyal man who was also an artist. He inspired and encouraged me, and, in fact, it's completely down to him that I was even considering a career as a playwright.

What I realized back then, was that I'd been truly blessed to have had beautiful relationships with the black men in my life. To me, the play painted an overwhelming negative portrayal of black men. It was clear that the play was an important, profound, and powerful exorcism of all the negative and toxic relationships that black women had experienced with black men. I was saddened by the fact that none of the loving relationships I had experienced were reflected. I was hopeful that the play would serve as a lesson in morality to any black men in the audience who were prone to the kinds of violent, ignorant, and destructive behaviors in the play. But I was also fearful that the play closed a door. "I found God in myself and I loved her fiercely." While this is a profoundly healthy and necessary thing for a woman to experience, I wondered then (and I still wonder) about the implications of this line. Are these women now so self-contained that the young, correct and righteous brothers who are out there have no chance of approaching them to build a relationship with them? That line can also imply, "I don't need you, I have God in myself."

No, of course, women do not need men to be whole and fulfilled. But, I have always hoped that the self-love Shange's characters find at the end of the play creates a secure foundation that enables them to love others. To be lonely for prolonged periods of time can be a terrible thing.

During the 42 years subsequent to my having seen the first production, I have seen several productions of "For Colored Girls..." done by college students. I am now the mother of two terrific sons, ages 35 and 40. They are single. My most fervent wish for them is that they find women who are healed and whole and ready to form healthy relationships with them. If Shange's play has helped create women like these, I am profoundly grateful to her.

—Unrevealed / i'm outside d.c.

*f*or colored girls... is teeming with resonance for a time such as this, when Black women are making strides towards spreading the power of our voice across mediums, disciplines and on rooms of privilege that, for us, were once tightly locked. Yet, we still find ourselves screaming over the voices of naysayers. And that alone is abuse. Shange has put words to emotions that for many, were only internalized bruises. This piece reminds us that there is victory on the other side of our brokenness.

—Angelica Chéri / i'm outside l.a./ bathing in sunshine

**T**here are those lines from literature—or lyrics from song—that shake you down to your very core, that hit you where you live even though you didn't know that "where" was a dwelling place inside of you. Those resonant closing lines of Ntozake Shange's *for colored girls who have considered when the rainbow is enuf* are a powerful example of what I mean: "I found God in myself and I loved her fiercely." Fiercely. The idea that God could be a "her" who lived inside a black woman, not "out there" or "up there" was a radical, even blasphemous concept, particularly given my upbringing in a religious household in the segregated south of the 1950s and '60s. There, gracing the mantle of our living room was the only image of "God" I had ever known: an 8 x 10, white-faced, longhaired Jesus in a gilt frame purchased from McClellan's 5 & 10 Cents Store.

When Shange took the New York theater world by storm in 1976 with her choreopoem—itsself a radical generic concept—I was midway through a doctoral program at a Big Ten Midwestern university. The piece, which I saw performed there, was a kind of lifeline for me and other black women navigating the treacherous waters of academia at a moment when we were only token members of the entire university's graduate cohort. Writings by black women—no matter the field—did not appear on our course syllabi, and the "gods" of my graduate department openly discouraged my suggestion that novels by three African American women of the Harlem Renaissance might constitute the focus of my dissertation. I eventually prevailed and "the rest," as they say, "is history."

This was no easy victory, if victory it can be called, but it was made far easier by the fact that Shange and Michelle Wallace and Toni Morrison, and Alice Walker—and many, many others—had demanded through the force of their work that the world take notice, even if such notice was often grudging. The success of Shange's choreopoem, along with that of other black women throughout the arts, was not uniformly celebrated. Indeed, their work was roundly condemned in many quarters, notably among black men with public platforms as journalists and reviewers, who accused black women writers, most especially, of plundering from the playbook of white supremacy by allegedly caricaturing black men as violent rapists, murderers, irresponsible fathers, domestic abusers, and general ne'er-do-wells. We, who had found a lifeline in this work, then and now, knew firsthand the truth of Shange's telling and were affirmed and consoled by those closing lines.

Whatever the eye-shading "truths" (and for whom) about the intimacies of black life were contained in the earlier scenes of the work, and however bereft they may have been of love, understanding and mutual respect, those closing words—"I found God in myself," preceded by a laying on of healing hands—were like communion wafers melting on our tongues. Importantly, we could not simply passively receive these words, however, for they demanded some action on the

part of their recipients. In other words, the grace they promised could not be acquired second-hand, for implied in “finding” is “seeking.” In other words, the only God we can find is the God we search for, even if that search lands us right back to the place from which we cannot escape, which is for many a distant, foreign place. Once we get “there” where we find the God within us, something more is required: that we claim, affirm, protect, and love her fiercely, fiercely. Michelle Cliff is right: “Shange’s statement conveys a Black woman loving God, a Blackwoman-loving God, a Black woman-loving God—a Black woman loving herself fiercely—fiercely on her own account, finding herself worthy and divine.” Shange knew all too well that this newfound divinity would need to be our refuge, our ever-present strength against the ritual slings and arrows of the world.

—Deborah McDowell / i’m outside charlottesville

*Oh Sankofa, high on the Heavens you soar  
My soul is soon to follow you, back to yesterday’s moon  
Will it remember me?  
Back to yesterday’s sun, It will rekindle me  
Rekindle the spirit into tomorrow and high on the wind  
Sankofa flies again and again*

*Oh Sankofa, high on the Heavens you soar  
My soul is soon to follow you, back to yesterday’s moon  
Will it remember me?  
Back to yesterday’s sun, It will rekindle me  
Rekindle the spirit into tomorrow and high on the wind  
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Will it remember me?  
Back to yesterday’s sun, It will rekindle me  
Rekindle the spirit into tomorrow and high on the wind  
Sankofa flies again and again...*

—“Sankofa” by Cassandra Wilson, *Blue Light ‘Til Dawn*

# The Worlds of Ntozake Shange

## Recommended Readings and Online Resources

by Vani Natarajan

*"I use poetry the way some people use encyclopedias: to find out more. I listen for a voice that springs from a real breath, a sweating body that speaks, or I stop reading."* –ntozake shange

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*Ntozake Shange. BC 8.4. Alumnae Biographical Files. Box 10* contains press clippings, images, flyers, and photocopied biographical articles on Ntozake Shange.

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These editions of *for colored girls* are housed in the Rare Books and Manuscripts Library, in Columbia University's Butler Library. For more information on viewing these sources, contact Curator for Literature Karla Nielsen at [kn2300@columbia.edu](mailto:kn2300@columbia.edu).

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## Production Histories

The [New York Public Library for the Performing Arts](#) holds numerous materials of interest to researchers exploring Ntozake's work as a choreographer, writer, director, and performer. The list below presents a few highlights of these collections. To explore these collections further, consult the [NYPL site](#).

[Ntozake Shange](#). One Hollinger Box of clippings, reviews, press releases, and other materials on Ntozake Shange, covering the years 1976-2007. Performing Arts Research Collections: Billy Rose Theatre Division.

[Oral History Interview with Ntozake Shange](#) by Kenneth Turan (1987). One sound disc, transferred from analog sound cassette. Performing Arts Research Collections: Sound.

Showtapes, readings, outtakes, cues, worktapes, rehearsals, and studio vocals from productions of works including *for colored girls*, *Spell #7*, *A Photograph: Lovers in Motion*, and *Betsey Brown*.

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[Ntozake Shange standing in front of a table of unidentified students with a paper in her hand](#). Black-and-white photograph. Special Collections, University of Houston Libraries. University of Houston Digital Library.

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*"No contemporary writer has Ms. Shange's uncanny gift for immersing herself within the situations and points of view of so many different types of women." —ISHMAEL REED*

*"I hit my head against the wall because I don't want to know all the terrible things that I know about. I don't want to feel all these wretched things, but they're in me already. If I don't get rid of them, I'm not ever going to feel anything else." —ntozake shange*

# The Sources/ Relevant Readings

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*for colored girls who have considered suicide / when the rainbow is enuf*



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***“& poem is my thank-you for music  
& i love you more than poem”  
—ntozake shange***