

Ntozake Shange's Choreopoem: Reinventing a Heritage of Poetry and Dance

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Ntozake Shange wrote *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/When the Rainbow is Enuf* in 1975. The following year, the play opened at the Henry Street Settlement's New Federal Theatre in New York, thrusting Shange into immediate prominence. That same year, and seventeen years after the phenomenal run of Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*, *Colored Girls* became the second play by a Black woman to reach Broadway.

Shange popularized a poetic style that sought to revive and tap from the “nonverbal” paradigms that inform her ancestral oral traditions. They include: music, song, dance, mime, movement, poetry, and ritual. To preserve this ceremonial ideal, she devised an avant-garde stage—the choreopoem—that integrated such “nonverbal” resources to overcome the limitations of dialogue and realism. The separation of these components, Shange believed, would deny African-Americans a theatrical heritage that emphasized action, collective participation, and celebration.

Shange particularly looked to the cultural significance of dance and music as powerful spiritual forces that foreground and preserve the socioartistic lifestyle of Black people within and beyond America. She would subsequently exploit these forms and apply them to her initial attention to issues concerning Black women.

Clearly, therefore, the merger and essence of several artistic genres in Shange's drama

illustrated her faith in African-based traditions. She dramatized a continuity of cultures from Africa to Black America, citing Africa as a distant but “accessible” homeland and identity source.

In her pursuit of a vibrant theatrical form, Shange initiated a revolutionary phase in the African-American quest for a functional theatre, and built on a form that was actually first advanced by Glenda Dickerson. Between 1967 and 1968, Dickerson’s *Tough on Black Actors Players* experimented with a structure that wove together poetry, drama, dance, and music. Drawing on her dance, movement, and vocal training, therefore, Dickerson began to experiment with and perfect the choreopoem style before the term was coined for Shange’s *Colored Girls*.

In her original utilization of the concept, Shange redesigned a non-linear dramatic pattern that distorted an “oppressive” language and dialogue culture, obscuring the progression of action and character. Her adherence to non-linearity was rooted in her belief that drama could relay diverse, though related themes through several voices and individual representations.

The task Shange specified for music and dance is similar to the role of both in African traditional performance. Apart from helping to retain ties with Africa, dance, like music, served as a cathartic agent for Shange, a defense mechanism, and an instrument of audience-performer participation and interaction. To fully explore Black music, dance, and other “nonverbal” resources, Shange endorsed the rejection of conventional theatre practices and the promotion of a rich interdisciplinary form that appealed to all the physical senses.

Reconstructing Standard English usage, Shange used language to reinforce her theatrical liberty and further reject standard practice. Using a colloquial, metaphoric, and

rhythmic style that agreed with her poetry, she deliberately distorted the English language by breaking away from conventional spellings and pronunciations. Thus, her lines are rhythmically and thematically separated by slashes, her letters are not traditionally capitalized, and her spellings are distorted. Shange's English is not "Black," it is a personal "Shange construct" that celebrates and corroborates her cultural, dramatic, and feminist self. In relying on this innovation to the exclusion of everyday English, she liberated herself, mentally, from the language of her oppressor.

Using her chosen "language," Shange addressed a wide range of themes, including, among others, racism, the unique position of Black woman, stereotypes, the Black middle-class, the disregard for Black artists, and Black survival. Central to her themes was a Black feminist and Pan-Africanist consciousness that emerged in her anti-racism and anti-imperialism stance, her rejection of Western cultural hegemony, and her commitment to recuperating marginalized Black traditions. Of all these concerns, the survival of Black women under varied systems of repression was most discernable in Shange's early drama.

Shange boldly exposed and fiercely denounced male sexism. Her female characters were usually independent, rebellious, and evolving, and were responsible for their own liberation and completeness. Although they lamented and bewailed their anguish, they also survived by fighting back and resolving not to give up. The overriding need to rise above bondage was exemplified in their persistent attempts to improve themselves and their situations, even after their minds and bodies had been mutilated. They therefore underwent reinvigorating rituals, picking themselves up after they were knocked down. The content of Shange's images demonstrated her ability to fascinate and scare women at the same time, to dignify their suffering, and to spur them on to overcome oppression. The resilience of her

women characters sought to negate chauvinist themes that flourished from the 1950s through the 1980s.

By creating and working with abstract or symbolic settings, Shange distanced herself from domestic locations, like the kitchen and dining room, in which stereotypical female roles are normally played out. Where she presented specific settings, continuous shifts in theme and time rendered them timeless and “universal.”

The intensity of Shange’s drama is perhaps best expressed in her adaptation of Frantz Fanon’s “combat breath” theory. Her “combat breathing” implies the opening of wounds that would be left to bleed as part of a healing process, inspiring solidarity and seeking the spiritual transcendence of a corporal existence where women are vulnerable.

Shange’s life and personal struggles had an extensive impact on her theatre. She was born Paulette Williams to Paul T. and Eloise Williams, a surgeon and a psychiatric social worker, in Trenton, New Jersey, on October 18, 1948. Growing up in a middle-class family as the oldest of four children, Shange enjoyed financial security and a sound education. Her early childhood, first in upstate New York and later in St. Louis, was extremely sheltered and comfortable.

Shange was eight when her parents moved the family to St. Louis, Missouri, where they resided for five years. There, in her early teens, she experienced prejudice, rejection, and mistreatment when she was bused 15 miles across town to integrate a previously all-White German-American school. However, the school offered training in literature, music, dance, and art—genres that would later feature prominently in Shange’s drama.

From an early age Shange was encouraged to read and play musical instruments by her parents. In addition, some of her parents’ friends were leading Black rhythm and blues

musicians, singers, and intellectuals, all of whom influenced Shange's vision and decision to write. They include, Dizzy Gillespie, Chuck Berry, Charlie Parker, Chico Hamilton, Sonny Chuck, Miles Davis, Josephine Baker, and W.E.B. DuBois. These artists and scholars encouraged diverse forms of artistic expression and inculcated Pan-Africanist values in Shange.

Shange was thirteen when her family returned to New Jersey where she completed high school. In New Jersey, she became increasingly aware of the constraints imposed by sexism and racism.

At eighteen, and while still attending Barnard College, New York City, in 1966, Shange separated from her first husband, a law student. The sense of alienation and bitterness resulting from her unsuccessful marriage culminated in a series of suicide attempts. Failing to commit suicide, Shange channeled her anger into student protests, Civil Rights and Black Liberation Movements. Her emergence into adulthood took place during the stormy period of the Vietnam War, the Black Power and Black Arts Movements, and, later, the Women's Movement. She eventually detested the prejudicial treatment of women in the Black Power and Arts Movements.

Shange earned a Bachelors (honors) degree in Afro-American music and poetry from Barnard College in 1970 and, in 1973, a Masters degree in American Studies from the University of Southern California. When she was in graduate school from 1971 to 1973, she spent more time researching her literary heritage. She read authors like Jean Toomer, Claude Mckay, Zora Neale Hurston, Ishmael Reed, Amiri Baraka, James Baldwin, Owen Dodson, Ann Petry, Richard Wright, Ted Joans, Leopold Senghor, and Aime Cesaire; all of whom influenced her future thematic and aesthetic choices. It was also in 1971 that she dropped

Paulette Williams and adopted the African (Zulu) name, Ntozake Shange. Ntozake means “she who comes with her own things” while Shange means “one who walks like a lion.” The new names pointed to her new identity and artistic direction.

From 1972 to 1975, Shange taught humanities, African-American and women’s studies, drama, and creative writing at Sonoma State College, Mills College, and the University of California Extension. While teaching at Sonoma State College, she began writing poetry in earnest. She also found time to dance and perform her poetry with the Third World Collective, Raymond Sawyer’s Afro-American Dance Company, the West Coast Dance Works, and her own company then called For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide. She also participated in poetry readings at San Francisco State College and with the Shameless Hussy poets. Eventually, Shange and Paula Moses, a choreographer friend, began working together, producing the 23 poems of *Colored Girls*. Shange presented the early version of *Colored Girls* at San Francisco coffeehouses.

In the early 1970s, radical activists in Boston and New York introduced Shange to Yoruba religions through the study of specific dance styles. These styles were partly influenced by Pearl Primus and Mercedes Baptista, two historically respected dancer/choreographers. Apart from incorporating blues and spiritual motifs into her 1940s dance choreography, Primus was among the first African-Americans to research and promote West African dance styles in the United States.

When Shange left New York in 1973 to join the Bata Koto dance group of San Francisco, headed by Gloria Toolsey and Luisah Teish, she studied with Raymond Sawyer whose training involved techniques pioneered by Primus and Katherine Dunham. A famous choreographer and anthropologist, Dunham contrived a method of Black dance instruction

based on her research in Haiti. Through Dunham, Shange was exposed to some of the basic components of Haitian vodun (same as voodoo) in which the belief systems of Yoruba, Dahomean, and Kongolese peoples are syncretized with Roman Catholicism. Her involvement with African-type dance was enhanced by her participation in the activities of Halifu Osumare's *The Spirit of Dance*, a small troupe of Black women. Shange also worked with dancers and musicians who practiced santeria, a religion developed among African slaves in Cuba. Taking advantage of her rich dance background, she reapplied this knowledge in the body language of *Colored Girls* with stunning effectiveness.

At the age of 27, Shange moved to New York where, in July 1975, *Colored Girls* was professionally produced at Studio Ribea in New York City. This was the beginning in a series of 867 performances, 747 on Broadway. It was also the beginning of Shange's climb to African-American artistic prominence. In 1977 she married jazz musician David Murray.

Beginning by relying almost absolutely on the choreopoem form, Shange gradually shifted to less rigid, though choreopoem-related formulas. The significance of her stylistic shift lies in her awareness of the creative restraints resulting from the formulation of rigid dramatic techniques. This gradual shift is evident in *Colored Girls* and four other dramatic pieces by Shange: *Boogie Woogie Landscapes* (1979), *Spell #7*(1979), *A Photograph: Lovers in Motion* (1977), and *Daddy Says* (1987).

The production of Shange's *Colored Girls* was a successful experiment with drama as a poetic idiom. The entire performance is a poetic and episodic dramatization of a series of events, mostly flashbacks, explicating stereotypical and genuine images of Black women, as well as their ordeals. Their needs, vulnerabilities, humors, psyches, and pains subsequently unfold as the plot develops.

Colored Girls finally addresses a broad range of issues: the manipulation of women, the emotional and physical abuse of women, infidelity, rape, unwanted pregnancies, abortion, seduction, unrequited love, and abandonment. Using dance, music, song, chanting, ritual, and poetry, Shange explores her themes in acted-out narratives, mostly satiric, rendered by seven allegorical women. As each woman narrates a story, she either performs it or has it acted out by other women. Participation, at various levels, ensures solidarity among the women. Shange relies more on movement and sound, and less on elaborate sets, costumes, lights, and stage blocking. Each woman in the play represents a color in the rainbow: brown, yellow, red, green, purple, blue, and orange. By casting “colored” women, Shange relives the challenges and limitless possibilities of non-White women within and beyond America.

The incantatory tone of *Colored Girls* heightens its ritual effect. Chanting and poetic language, which involves a call and response structure, as well as the choral repetition of lines by groups and individuals are common expressive idioms of African-based rituals and ceremonies. The rhythmic effect of this poesy blends with music, song, and dance to sustain the musical dimensions of the drama.

The significance of Shange’s ritualistic technique is apparent at the end of the drama when the women characters are renewed; they come full circle from passivity and subservience to defiance and rebelliousness. Their trance state gathers momentum through repetitive lines, stimulating a gratifying moment in which performers and spectators experience the euphoria of a rediscovered divinity. Each woman undergoes a communal yet private rediscovery of her self-worth. Their rite-of-passage is complete as they have craved, sought, and secured the freedom of the rainbow, the freedom of nature, and freedom from repression.

Structured on the boogie-woogie, Shange's *Boogie Woogie Landscapes* is an expressionistic and fantasy representation filtered through the random thoughts, reveries, visions, hopes, "combat breath," internal conflicts, and memories of the play's single "real" character, Layla. The notion of boogie-woogie as speeded up blues music reflects the play's rendition of the central character's thought process in quick succession. Dealing with correlating themes in different parts of *Landscapes*, Shange deviates from the traditional beginning, middle, and end arrangement, and presents her subject matter via the spontaneous thought process of the boogie-woogie. Her approach harmonizes with the random foregrounding of unresolved themes bordering on color, racism, sexism, and ignorance; all of which sieve through Layla's mental state. Hope is eventually, but subtly, foreseen in the efficacy of music.

An adaptation of the choreopoem, *Landscapes* resembles *Colored Girls* in its use of unreal, symbolic characters; downplay of dialogue; use of flashbacks; use of episodic renditions; and portrayal of themes and sub-themes in imagistic monologues. As in *Colored Girls*, too, major themes center on Blacks, especially Black women and girls. Unlike *Colored Girls*, however, the "characters" here are not only women; men are present and interact with the women, and there are also occasional instances of actual dialogue. So, *Landscapes* is not a choreopoem in the original sense displayed in *Colored Girls*.

While *Landscapes* is technically set in Layla's bedroom, the real "landscape" lies within her head. This mental process, both conscious and unconscious, grows out of a hostile racist and sexist setting, and is relayed in quick, stream-of-consciousness succession, suggesting speed and kinesis. The caustic revelations handed out by Layla are surprisingly direct.

Shange's *Spell #7* is set in a St. Louis bar frequented by largely unsuccessful or frustrated Black musicians and artists. The Black identities constructed within this exorcised space are free of the dominant culture's control and stereotypes. In line with the choreopoem, this play is structured on a non-linear and non-realistic plot arrangement, narrative patterns, and a stream-of-consciousness and play-within-play formula. An improvisational effect is sustained in what resembles a spontaneous rendering and dramatization of race and gender-oriented stories in several tonal voices by the characters.

The characters, male and female, are multidimensional, playing their roles within one frame as well as other roles within a second frame located in the various sub-stories within the plot. Although they engage in dialogue, there is movement, song, poetry, and music, all of which preserve a choreopoem structure and release the play from rigid theatrical conventions.

These forms ensure close contact with audience members who are occasionally addressed and challenged by the cast. Music and dance thus help to invent a sacred ground where commonality and solidarity thrive. This way, the unified characters gain familial and spiritual nourishment, which is both tested and strengthened through a process of socioartistic growth.

The above dramatic elements reinforce a series of poetic vignettes centering on fear, identity, racism, sexism, and the status of Black artists in America.

Thus, a multitude of themes—racial, sexual, philosophic, and psychotherapeutic—unfold in *Spell #7* as characters unburden their souls and dreams in soliloquies often accompanied by appropriate music, dances, and mime. In typical Shange fashion, these themes exist within a series of related plots, so that assorted stories create a unified theatrical whole.

Spell #7 marks an even greater departure from the choreopoem than *Landscapes*.

This shift permits Shange to utilize other historically grounded theatrical tools, in this case, minstrelsy. The minstrel tradition evolves as a major theatrical and thematic resource in the play. Influenced by Black southern song, music, and dance styles, minstrelsy emanates from slave artistic ingenuity and, indirectly, African musical traditions. African traditions of music, song, and dance are subsequently preserved in the play's minstrel motif, and situated early in the plot. The African-American minstrel, hence artistic legacy materializes as a key factor with Shange's initial stage directions.

A Photograph tells the story of Sean David, a misogynistic, ambitious photographer and the three women in his life—Michael, a dancer; Nevada, an attorney; and Claire, a model. While all three women are in love with him, he merely needs them to satisfy his ego. Sean pretends to be a strong Black male, but his façade is crushed when he is rejected for a fellowship and a gallery exhibition that would otherwise launch his career.

Like *Spell #7*, the structure of *A Photograph* hints at Shange's gradual departure from a rigid choreopoem pattern. Interacting male and female characters in the play are used to express themes that go past racial and gender conflicts. The three women in the play are not simply victims of sexism alone. Aside from falling prey to Sean's manipulation, obsession with control, egoism, past life, and false sense of direction, they also fall prey to their own confusions, instabilities, and yearnings for attention and self-worth. Sean, on other hand, is not just another by-product of racism. He is also a victim of internal pressures, his past, his emasculation fears, and his narcissistic appetite for power, command, and materialism. For the first time, too, Shange's women are curiously pessimistic and rigidly indecisive, not confident and emphatic.

A Photograph is unique in its treatment of themes beyond the customary racist and

sexist issues that are prominent in Shange's plays.

When Shange writes *Daddy Says*, she practically discards her choreopoem style. More than any of her dramas already discussed, this work resembles conventional drama the most. Addressing the sexual and social development of Black women in the play, Shange journeys into the American Southwest where there has been a tradition of Black cowboys/girls as active participants in horse and cattle driving. Emerging as an indigenous ritual, rodeo delineates social implications that surpass an ordinary sporting event, and reinforces the unity of the Brown family in the play.

After experimenting with the choreopoem and related theatrical structures, and in spite of her successes, with time Shange obviously decided not to rely solely on the form. In *Daddy Says* she uses elements of the standard theatre that she draws upon in *A Photograph*, and more extensively too. The characters in the play are not figurative in the sense that characters are in *Colored Girls* and *Landscapes*, and the plot comprises a conventional beginning, middle, and end. While speech is separated into rhythmic beats with slashes, language, for the most part, is prosaic, straightforward, and somewhat colloquial. Spellings are mostly regular, traditional dialogue is maintained, while the aesthetic qualities of music, song, dance, and mime are eliminated.

However, *Daddy Says* readdresses a recurrent subject in earlier Shange plays, which is the central theme of sexism as it affects young Black women and girls, and is directed at the freedom or lack thereof of women to make vital choices for themselves. Reminiscent of *Colored Girls*, the play displays an unrelenting female yearning for growth.

Shange's choreopoems, *Colored Girls* and *Landscapes*, her quasi choreopoem arrangement in *Spell #7* and *A Photograph*, and her more traditional approach in *Daddy Says*,

illustrate her willingness to exploit diverse theatrical techniques and subjects. She shows in *Daddy Says* that conventional methods can be adopted, albeit not strictly, in dealing with culture-specific and gender-specific issues. As Shange gradually shifted from a rigid choreopoem formula, she also shifted from the central focus on the female as main subject-matter and began to include other facets of Black life, America, life beyond America, and human psychology.

Overall, Shange played a key role in expanding the Black literary focus on racial and cultural identity so that it embraced a sexual revolution. Having lost faith in the ability of men to respond effectively to female subordination, she furnished the American stage with not just a significant Black presence but a feminine one too. Shange thus made pronounced contributions to the Black Aesthetic and its efforts to break down conventional walls. Her structural and representational choices show that while she confronted critical themes and raised fundamental questions, she also mourned the loss of an indigenous culture whose strength was dependent on rhythmic and religious precedents. It is a culture that her theatre strived to recover.

-- Philip U. Effiong

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