

Welcome to A Deep Dive, I'm Reggie.

In this episode, a celebration of the creative genius of Ntozake Shange and her brilliant choreopoem.

Thanks for joining for, For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/When the Rainbow is Enuf.

I hesitated in doing this episode because I find it so annoying when an accomplished artist is reduced to their most famous work but when I heard that Ntozake Shange's choreopoem For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/When the Rainbow is Enuf had not only returned for the first time in 40 years to The Public but had been extended it seemed like the perfect time to talk about Shange and this astonishing work of poetry dance and theater.

Shange born Paulette Linda Williams in Trenton, New Jersey in 1948 to an Air Force surgeon father, and an educator and a psychiatric social worker mother. When she was eight, the family moved to the racially segregated city of St. Louis, Il. Shange was part of the wave of black students bused to all-white schools and it was not a warm experience for her. Shange would speak lovingly of the joys of living in a segregated neighborhood with other people of color without rancor or fear.

In 1966, Shange attended Barnard College in New York. Her time at Barnard sounds intense. The 1960s was a difficult time for many young people as they wrestled with the dissonance between the traditions of academia and the emerging political urgency that challenged much of that tradition. On top of all of this Shange married and divorced during this time triggering a sustained period of depression and several suicide attempts.

Ultimately she graduated with honors and was accepted into the University of Southern California's master's degree program in American studies in Los Angeles, California.

Shange said her academic career and life in California were transformative. She began to delve into the African American canon of literature and the emerging field of women's studies. Around this time she was given the name "Ntozake Shange," in Zulu Ntozake means "she who comes with her own things and Shange "walks like a lion" by South African friend.

In addition to the feminist collective artist movement in Berkeley, Ca Ntozake Shange was also influenced by the Black Arts Movement described as the "aesthetic and spiritual sister of the Black Power movement. Though male artists such as Amari Baraka heavily dominated the Black Arts Movement, some notable women writers of the movement were Gwendolyn Brooks, Nikki Giovanni, Rosa Guy, Lorraine Hansberry, Lucille Clifton, and Sonia Sanchez.

In a 2003 piece in the New Yorker Hilton Al quoted Shange about this period "It was around this time that the Anais Nin diaries were discovered, as well as the true tragedy of Sylvia Plath and the reprinting of 'Their Eyes Were Watching God,' " by Zora Neale Hurston. "So there was a lot of excitement in the women's community about the discovery of women's heartfelt perceptions of reality. I felt the urgency of the moment to tell the long-untold stories of women."

Shange said that the poet Judy Grahn's 1969 collection, "The Common Woman," gave her the idea and the courage to write a series of poems assigned to nameless women preferring to use colors instead, Lady in Red, Lady in Blue and so on.

In the summer of 1974, Shange began writing a series of poems exploring the various aspects of a specific women's life with a through-line of self-identification and self-love.

In 1975, Shange and Paula Moss moved back to New York City joining a group of poets in the founding of the Nuyorican Poets Café, in New York's lower east side. By the way, if you've never been to The Nuyorican Poets Café you should do yourself a favor.

In New York Shange collaborated with Diane McIntyre at her Sounds in Motion studio on the beginnings of dance movement for the work and stayed with the show through its Broadway run.

By December of 1975, Shange said, "We had weaned the piece of extraneous theatricality and had enlisted the collective talents of Tarzana 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, a stage manager at the Papp Theater. 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.

A choreopoem is a term Shange invented to describe something not quite dance, not quite a theater but entirely poetry driven by music.

Before Joseph Papp could give for colored girls home at the Public Theater he had to see the darn show and it wasn't easy. After several attempts, Papp said he'd stop by Demonte's a bar on the lower east side where the showing being performed, but he could only stay for 20 minutes. An hour and twenty minutes later, he was still there." Papp "I was struck, first of all," "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 for colored girls... opened at the Public Theater on June 1, 1976, the critics raved and nearly every performance sold out. Think of Hamilton at the Public. It was the same kind of buzz and energy.

The decision to move the sold-out show to Broadway was a no brainer. On September 1976, For Colored Girls opened at the Booth Theater on Broadway July 1978 running for 742 performances, by the way, Neil Simon's California suite the musical Godspell and David Mamet American Buffalo all opened in the same season and For Colored Girls outlasted them all. If you're wondering about the title Shange said she used colored so that her grandmother would understand what and who the work was about, she said it was a spark of creative inventiveness on her part or as she put it, I fell in love with my own cleverness so I kept it. It's one of the longest titles ever for a Broadway show, one last thing Shange always mentions her sister playwright and writer Ifa Bayeza as a major influence and inspiration for her through the process of writing for colored girls and other work that they collaborated on.

## **From the stage directions.**

The stage is bare with a large flower as the backdrop Large flower as the backdrop and to quote from the stage directions the stage is in darkness harsh music is heard as blue dim lights come up one after another Seven women run onto stage from each of the exits they all freeze and postures of distress the follow spot picks up the lady and brown she comes to life and looks around at the other ladies all of the others are still she walks over to the lady in red and calls to her the lady in red makes no response the lady in brown starts with the poem dark phases it's an invocation to summon up the neglected spirit of the black girl and woman here is the last part of that first poem dark phases sing her song of life she's been dead for so long closed in silence so long she doesn't know the sound of her own voice her infinite beauty she's half notes scattered without rhythm no tune singer sighs sing the song of her possibilities sing a righteous gospel let her be born let her be born and handled warmly and with this each woman in turn announces her location I'm outside Chicago I'm outside San Francisco I'm outside Detroit and so on with the lady in Brown ending and this is for colored girls who have considered suicide but moved to the ends of their own rainbows.

The idea of a group of poems being spoken one after another seemingly interrupted occasionally by dance and music might sound like it would be static but actually, the music and movement are a vital part, an extension of the poetry of the spoken word. Ntozake Shange is borrowing from the African tradition and later the African American tradition of using music and movement as commentary, punctuation, and at times healing, all in the service of showing us a multifaceted, multidimensional deeply-felt black woman which was rare then and now.

Black women on stage and off are often seen as angry over emotional lacking in reflective intelligence incapable of insight into their own inner workings, their humor, their devastation, and the possibility for renewal.

Shange gives us a whole black woman human to love we do one of my favorite poems in the early section of the piece that shows in Ntozake Shange facility with language her insight her sense of humor is the poem with no assistance it's occasioned by the end of a lopsided affair and it is performed here by Tarzana Beverly.

What I love about that piece is that it lays bare the illusion of any sort of mutual respect or affection while never losing sight of personal responsibility the line I want you to know that this has been an experiment accounting for your willingness to have participated in something that seems now so unsatisfying the shattering and shortest poem is called abortion cycle and it ends with the line I was once pregnant and ashamed of myself the other poem that wrenches you out of the relative safety of stories of love and lovers an loss is a poem about date rape the women recite this poem together as if they are in dialogue with one another confirming the things that are commonly known among them recounting the betrayal of having violence perpetrated upon you by a friend or acquaintance and the punishing reality of how that violence will be handled by the police.

This made me think about how much things have changed over the 40 years since this play was written according to a 2016 Justice Department analysis 80% of rapes and sexual assaults go unreported in the United States in the UK only five point 7% of reported rape cases end in a

conviction the other statistic that bears this poem out is There's this point out is that in the UK 90% of reported rapes and sexual assaults are committed by people known by the victim.

These two poems are followed by a cycle of four-point poems called no more love poems they start with the words ever since I realized that there was someone called a colored girl an evil woman, a bitch or a nag I've been trying not to be the bitterness in someone else's cup.

What I love about this poem is that the remedy isn't appeasement or making herself smaller to accommodate a man it's delving deeper into her own self-expression through dance music and poetry to more fully realize herself this section ends in the realization in these words but being alive and being a woman and being colored is a metaphysical dilemma I haven't quite conquered yet do you see the point.

Quote of the poem My Love; This gives way to a dance and chanting that creates a feeling of exhilaration it's one of the most beautiful exhilarating moments I think I've ever spent or seen in a theater or on a stage.

The poem somebody almost walked off with all my stuff is both funny and deeply knowing I'll never forget seeing the original production of for colored girls and when this poem came there's a line that says it was a lover I had made too much room for the woman sitting next to me let out a quiet Uhm that was so deeply felt that it resonated right through me and I'm sure through the people sitting in front of her. It was one of those truly communal moments.

The emotional apex of the evening is the piece a night with Bo Willie Brown it is the longest piece in the play or the choreopoem, it's also one of the only pieces that gives names to its characters.

The lady in red played by Trazana Beverley in the original production won a Tony Award for her work it's strange to single out one person in such a deeply ensembled piece but I'm nearly certain that her performance and the writing for this piece helped.

With nothing on stage, no props to help or hide her presented Beverly the lady in red unspools this tragedy first in the third person reporting to us like a modern Greek chorus with dark shades of humor, describing Bo Willie Brown wrapped in bedsheets looking like John the Baptist or a giant baby with stubble and nuts. As the scene moves to its inexorable conclusion the dialogue switches from the third person to the first and suddenly the chorus is Crystal herself bargaining, terrified until the end when she screams out, he dropped them. The women surround the lady in red consoling loving her, willing her back to life with the final spoken words of the piece that end with the phrase, "I found god in myself and I loved her fiercely." The spoken verse turns into song softly at first to one another then to the audience now sung enjoy until the lady in Brown steps forward with the closing words of the choreopoem and this is for colored girls who have considered suicide but are moving to the ends of their own rainbows.

I think for colored girls who considered suicide when the rainbow is enough is one of the Great American plays. There is a tendency to treat plays featuring underrepresented people as novelty or niche speaking only to a specific audience this reminds me of overhearing a beautifully dressed woman during the intermission of Lena Horne's one-woman show the lady and her music as she harrumphed to her companion I wanted to like this show but it's just for black people as if the power of art only resonates with you when it's reflecting your own life experience how boring is that?

Great art has the power to transcend, to elevate, to demand our full emotional attention and For Colored Girls is all of that and so much more. As I record this, the new production For Colored Girls playing at the Public Theater has just been extended and I wouldn't be surprised at all if this production moves to Broadway just like the original production did 40 years ago.

Before I wrap up I want to or need to address the movie version of the choreopoem.

In 2013, Lionsgate and the director-actor and producer Tyler Perry wrote the screenplay for and directed a film called For Colored Girls, I'll post a pretty illuminating interview with Ntozake Shange talking about the process and her disappointment in bringing the choreopoem to the screen.

I confess I've never seen the entire film from start to finish but what I have seen is drenched in melodrama with Christian overtones and lots and lots of tears and very little joy or laughter basically, not like the play at all the poems themselves are intact and they are done beautifully particularly by Loretta Devine but as I say overall Ntozake Shange was not a happy camper with this with the results of this film.

In 2004 Shange had a stroke followed by a series of strokes she never fully recovered from these strokes but she continued to write and make public appearances until she could no longer do either. She died in her sleep on October 27th, 2018, she was 70 years old.

When asked to reflect on the impact of For Colored Girls have considered suicide when the Rainbow is Enuf Shange said, "I think this piece is my gift to women and girls forever and ever it may not be all I have but it's one solid thing I have to leave to girls and women around the world."

For a list of Shange's work and for photographs, audio recordings, or video recordings of the original production including the beautifully arresting theater poster you can find them all at the deep dive website at [www.reggiedeepdive.com](http://www.reggiedeepdive.com). Thanks to Joshua Rich for allowing me to use his beautiful song rain as the podcast theme song.

This tribute to Ntozake Shange and For Colored Girls Who Considered Suicide When the Rainbow is Enuf was researched and written by me, Reggie.

Thanks for joining me.

See ya next time.

Episode Notes:

