Ntozake Shange

Ntozake Shange is one of America’s greatest living writers—an acknowledged master in the genres of drama, fiction, memoir, and poetry. Shange was raised mainly in Trenton, NJ and St. Louis, MO. In her childhood, she was affected deeply by the Civil Rights Movement and forced school busing. Later, attending Barnard College in the late 1960’s, she came under the influence of a wide variety of radical movements, including the antiwar Vietnam protests, feminism, the black arts and black liberation movements, the Puerto Rican liberation movement, and the Sixties sexual revolution. She later became a voice for all these social justice movements, but above all she spoke for, and in fact embodied, the ongoing struggle of black women for equality, dignity, and respect for their enormous contribution to human culture.

Her theatre piece *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/ When the Rainbow Is Enuf* (dubbed a “choreopoem” for its highly original combination of music, poetry, and dance) was a stunning success on Broadway in 1976-1977. Considered a landmark not just in American theatre but also in theatre worldwide, it won an Obie while still off-Broadway at the Public Theater. *For Colored Girls…* has been performed continuously since then both in the United States and abroad, has remained in print since its publication in 1974 and was made into a movie by Tyler Perry in 2010. *For Colored Girls…* stands as one of only two unquestioned Broadway hit productions by African American women in the history of the New York theater—the other being the incomparable Lorraine Hansberry’s “A Raisin in the Sun” from 1959. Shange won a second Obie in 1981 for her adaptation of Bertolt Brecht’s *Mother Courage and Her Children* at the Public Theater, and she has won a veritable mountain of other awards, including an Outer Critics Circle Award, an AUDELCO award, a Guggenheim fellowship, a National Endowment for the Arts fellowship, the Lila Wallace-Reader’s Digest Fund annual writer’s award, the Los Angeles Times Book Prize for poetry, the Paul Robeson Achievement Award, the National Black Theatre Festival’s Living Legend Award, a New Federal Theatre lifetime achievement award, and the Medal of Excellence from Columbia University. She has also been nominated for Tony, Grammy, and Emmy awards.

In a hugely prolific career, Shange has written 15 plays, 19 poetry collections, 6 novels, 5 children’s books, 3 collections of essays, and a partial memoir called *Lost in Language & Sound*. Among her more notable novels are *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo; Betsey Brown* (about her childhood and the Civil Rights movement in St. Louis), and *Liliane: Resurrection of the Daughter*, a highly innovative fiction incorporating the methods of psychoanalysis in a semi-autobiographical novel—a prose work that, like many other pieces of her fiction and poetry, she has also adapted for the stage. Among her other notable plays are *A Photograph: Lovers in Motion; Spell # 7;* and *From Okra to Greens*. She also collaborated with some of the most notable black photographers of her era in the highly-praised photo-and-poetry collection *The Sweet Breath of Life.*
Ms. Shange has, in addition, taught at major American universities such as Rice University, Villanova University, and DePaul University. She has lectured extensively at perhaps a hundred different universities and colleges, including Yale, Howard, NYU, Mills College, the California State Colleges, and the City College of New York. She has traveled the world, including a tour in South Africa with the renowned choral group Ladysmith Black Mambazo. Her travels have also had a political bent, taking her to revolutionary hot spots such as the Caribbean, Cuba, Angola, and Nicaragua, where she has often met and talked with progressive and populist leaders. From childhood on, she has been privileged to know many of the great writers and artists of color, such as W.E.B. Du Bois, Romare Bearden, Miles Davis, Amiri Baraka, Maya Angelou, Toni Morrison, among hundreds of others.

Perhaps more than any other contemporary writer, Shange’s work—much of it, even her prose, meant to be performed onstage—is part and parcel of modern jazz, especially what is called “free jazz” or “new black music,” which is the type of jazz she came of age with. She has performed with many of the jazz greats of her time, including Sun Ra, Ornette Coleman, Archie Shepp, David Murray, Hamiet Bluiett, and so many more. Trained in violin, she has often been considered a musician by her fellow performers.

Trained also as a dancer Ms. Shange has given many professional dance performances, including a brief stint in the initial Broadway production of *For Colored Girls…* In collaboration with choreographer Dianne McIntyre, Ms. Shange has in recent years presented new combinations of dance and poetry at such venues as Barnard College and Oberlin College.

Ms. Shange has also, worked as a director, including at the Public Theater and the Ensemble Theatre in Houston. In addition to her work with Houston’s Ensemble Theatre, Ms. Shange has presented plays or in other ways collaborated with almost every major black theatre company in the country, including the Lorraine Hansberry Theatre in San Francisco, the Freedom Theatre in Philadelphia, and Crossroads Theatre Company in New Brunswick, New Jersey.

Shange’s most recent work, a one-act choreo-essay called *Lost in Language & Sound* (adapted from the memoir of the same title), is an ambitious attempt to present a poetic panorama of her entire life, and the wisdom learned therein, within the confines of a one-hour musical and choreographic drama. It premiered at the Nuyorican Poets Café in New York City and saw workshop performances of a substantially revised version at 651 Arts Center in New York and Karamu House, Cleveland in 2015. Shange’s revision of her choreo-poem *A Photograph----A Study in Cruelty* is in preparation for an Off-Broadway presentation this year.

In recognition of this work, and all of her other cultural contributions, Ms. Shange was honored with a proclamation of Ntozake Shange Day, (Borough of Manhattan, New York) by Congressman Charles Rangel on June 14, 2014.