



Ntozake Shange

“

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.

— Sassafrass, Cypress, and Indigo

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Biography

Ntozake Shange declares herself a poet first and playwright second. She is also a dancer, actor, director, author, lecturer, and black feminist. In 1971, she adopted the name “Ntozake Shange,” pronounced En-toe-zok-ee Shan-gay, from Xhosa, a Zulu dialect, which signifies “she who comes into her own things” (Ntozake) and “she who walks like a lion” (Shange). In a 1990 interview with Neal A. Lester, Shange explains, “I’m a firm believer that language and how we use language determines how we act, and how we act then determines our lives and other people’s lives.”

Shange was born Paulette Williams in Trenton, New Jersey, on October 18, 1948. Her mother Eloise, an educator and social worker, and her father Paul, a sports physician, contributed to the rich intellectual environment surrounding Shange’s childhood. Shange recalls as a child the family friends who often frequented their home, names like Dizzy Gillespie, Paul Robeson, Walter White, and W.E.B. Dubois. “I used to sit up on the stairway in the front of the house and watch the people come in and I could listen to the talk going on in the back” (Interview with Brenda Lyons, 1986).

Quick Facts

- * Born in 1948
- * African-American choreopoet, novelist, and playwright

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During these same years, Shange and her sister attended poetry readings. Even at a young age, she began to analyze and critique the poetry she had heard. At one reading, Shange recalls the poetry of women who had formerly been raised in the South. “We were getting very upset by what, in our ignorance, we saw as their romanticization of Southern living. And I was saying to myself, if it was as wonderful as all that, why in the hell did you all come up here?” (Interview with Henry Blackwell)

Shange also became increasingly aware of the limits placed on Blacks and women in society. In 1956, the Williams family moved to Missouri. Being a “gifted” child, Shange was sent several miles away from home to school in St. Louis to receive special schooling. For the first time, she attended a non-segregated school. She experienced overt racism and was constantly harassed by the other students. Seeing reality at such an early age created a sense of displacement for Shange while becoming the motivational force behind her writing, “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 . . .” (Interview with Brenda Lyons 1986). Shange’s goal became to be a part of a collection of books that someone might give to a female child.

In 1966, Shange enrolled in Barnard College in New York. Her years as an undergraduate were marked by many significant events. On a personal level, Shange married and separated from a law student at the age of nineteen. She also performed the first of several suicide attempts - by sticking her head into an oven. In regards to her education, Shange became starved for Black literature. In an interview with Henry Blackwell, Shange summarizes her college education, “For years, I was able to tolerate being chastised and denigrated in American literature and any other kind of literature because that is where we were, and that’s how women were regarded.” She graduated with honors in 1970 with a B.A. in American Studies. Deciding that there was no space for an independent woman’s voice, Shange moved from New York to California, and attended graduate school at University of Southern California. Here, Shange taught writing and began to associate with poets, teachers, performers, and feminist writers. “My craft was seriously nurtured in California and that probably has some influence on what my writing looks like” (Interview with Henry Blackwell). It was in graduate school where she became “Ntozake Shange.” In 1973, she earned her Master’s Degree in American Studies.



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Shange continued living in California and taught courses in humanities, women's studies, and writing at various colleges. Not only was she writing poetry, Shange and her friends began to perform their poetry, music, and dance in and around San Francisco. "The poetry of the Black writer on the West Coast clarifies - migrations, our relationship to the soil, to ourselves in space. There is an enormous amount of space in the West, and you do not feel personally impinged upon every time you come out your door, like you do in New York and Chicago" (Blackwell). In addition to teaching, writing, and performing, Shange joined Halifu Osumare's dance company. Here, she met a woman by the name of Paula Moss. They began collaborating on poetry, music, and dance that would become part of Shange's first chorepoem, *For colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf: a choreopoem*.

In 1975, Shange moved back to New York with Moss. They started performing the choreopoem in Soho Jazz lofts and later in bars in the lower East Side. Soon, a producer by the name of Woodie King Jr. saw one of these performances. With the help of director Oz Scott, Shange's choreopoem was staged at the New Federal Theatre off-Broadway. In 1976 it was moved to Anspacher Public Theatre, and that same year, it was produced on Broadway at the Booth Theatre. It won several awards including an Obie Award and Outer Circle Award in addition to Tony Award nominations in 1977. This marked the beginning of Shange's career.

For colored girls who have considered suicide . . . altered the course of dramatic and dance history in America. The cast of colorfully dressed women blend poetry, dance, and theatre to celebrate their kinship and support of each other as they dance the blues of race and gender, as well as the loves and triumphs that define their individual identities as black women. Each actor-dancer recites her poem as she gestures and moves to the meanings and feelings of her words while the rest of the ensemble is immobile and silent. Then, in response to the individual's poem, the ensemble chants and moves together. Not only does this create a unifying and supportive energy amongst the women on stage, but between the performers and audience as well. In sync with her goals as a writer, Shange assumes the responsibility to discover the causes of the pain of black women and communicate these with honesty. "It's like creating a world that's women-centered, so aberrant male forms really look aberrant." (Lyons 1986). *For colored girls who have considered suicide* . . . raised a furor in the late seventies. Not only was it radical due to its appropriating of space exclusively for women's pleasure, Shange herself was attacked as a traitor to her race by black literary scholars and put down as a writer and black woman.



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Shange's chorepoem created space for women of color to express themselves and introduces Shange's innovative use of language. This is the foundation of Shange's writing, "It's very scary to me as a woman that we're denied and defiled in language. I mean that language will allow us to function more competently and more wholly in a holistic sense as human beings once we take hold of it say what we want it to say" (Lyons). Her style is distinctively lyrical with elliptical spelling, and innovative syntax and punctuation: "i am endin this affair/this note is attached to a plant/I've been waterin since the day i met you/you may mater it/yr own damn self" (*for colored girls who have considered suicide*. . . , p. 14). These linguistic devices reflect a resistance to American "Standard English" of the politically empowered. Shange believes not only must she repossess language, but "deslaveryize" it.

Shange's fiction focuses on the metaphysical dilemma of being alive, being a woman, and being a person of color. The plots of her work tend to undulate instead of move straight forward. This technique focuses on the development of personalities, interpersonal reactions, and relationships, so one can learn each character's personal imagery and iconography, slowly and in greater detail. Shange believes "Women novels are more like breathing and men's more like running" (Lyons 1986).

Shange continued to produce plays, chorepoems, and poetry. *Nappy Edges*, was published in 1978, featuring fifty poems celebrating the voices of defiantly self-sufficient women. In 1979, chorepoems *Spell #7*, *A Photograph: lovers in motion*, and *Boogie Woogie Landscapes* were published. They comprise the collection *Three Pieces*, a dramatic trilogy that won the "Los Angeles Time Book Prize for Poetry." In 1982, Shange published her first novel, *Sassafrass, Cypress, and Indigo*.

Taking place in a post Civil Rights Movement climate, Shange combines narrative, poetry, magic spells, recipes, and letters to tell a story that takes us through the internal and external journey of three sisters, Sassafrass, Cypress, and Indigo, and their mother Hilda Effania. Two of the sisters, Sassafrass and Cypress, travel far afield in search of identity and sense of purpose they subsequently bring back home and try to take root. Sassafrass, a weaver like her mother, falls into a destructive sexual union with a tenor saxophone player named Mitch. Mitch indulges in his music and life freely, at the same time muting that of Sassafrass. While Mitch accepts her weavings which glorify male "heroes" like Malcom X and Marcus Garvey, he forces her to remove an erotic hanging representing Josephine Baker with the explanation that "it wasn't proper for a new afrikan woman to make things of such sexual nature" (*Sassafrass, Cypress, and Indigo* 78). It is clear that Sassafrass's major goal is to achieve a positive sense of self, despite the sexism of her lover Mitch.



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The story of Cypress has sparked criticism, causing the novel to be attacked as homophobic. Shange tends to introduce Cypress's narrative as a deceptive "solution" to the male - female conflict that she previously explored between Sassafrass and Mitch. Cypress is a dancer, deals drugs in New York City's underground, and appears to be flowing between the identities of heterosexual and lesbian. Offended by the overt insulting of women in her dance troupe, Cypress aligns herself with the lesbian collective. She then discovers that women can be as sexually exploitative as men. After ending her painful love affair with another dancer named Idrina, Cypress throws herself into her dancing. Eventually, she finds herself in love with a musician named LeRoy. Her relationship with LeRoy testifies to her arrival at personal liberty. In a 1986 interview with Brenda Lyons, Shange had this to say in response to the criticism, "I wanted to point out that when you are seeking love and companionship, you can't just say, well, this is a sexist society and men are the enemy, therefore I'm gonna seek women. Because that's not going to save you. I think I was trying to be honest about the gay community."

Indigo, the youngest of the three daughters, is introduced as a character completely separate from that of her sisters. The first line of the book, "Where there is a woman there is magic" (3), sets the tone for Indigo's character. Her world is a world of women, real and imagined. She loves to play with dolls, converse with Aunt Haydee the shaman, and visit Mrs. Yancey and her sister Mary Louise. At the same time that Indigo indulges in her world, the men who enter it cause an important change or growth in her. Uncle John gives her a fiddle symbolizing a new medium through which Indigo can speak about herself more openly and honestly. Indigo joins a "gang" called the Geechees where members Crunch and Spats offer her acceptance and comradery. Indigo's travel goes no further than islands along the coast where Aunt Haydee will instruct and guide Indigo through African and African American traditions prompting spiritual growth.

Shange laces the book with letters from Hilda Effania who provides advice for her children. It is clear that she only wants to see her children fulfilled - in a comfortable upper-middle class setting. She urges her daughters to marry doctors and lawyers and live a secure life with a home and a husband. And, although this idea of stability is not what the daughters choose, Hilda Effania never fails to try to convince her daughters to settle down and accept the values of security and safety, "There's nothing so heartening as a good provider and companion. And you girls realize, by now, how hard an artist's life is. So let some nice man help you. Then all you have to worry about is your art" (117). Nevertheless, Hilda Effania fosters in her daughters the confidence and ambition that is their real protection on their journey to self-knowledge.



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Shange continued to publish poetry and write novels. *Betsy Brown* (1985) is the story of a young girl growing up in St. Louis in the 1950s. Here, Shange affirms childhood as a source of creativity. Her third novel, *Liliane: Resurrection of the Daughter* (1994) relates the life of the title character, an artist, from her lovers' perspectives. Liliane uses the information she has within her power as a woman to make her life and the lives of those people around her better.

Shange's work empowers women to take responsibility for their lives by learning to love themselves and challenge their oppressors. She serves on the faculty in the Department of Drama at the University of Houston and continues to give lectures at various colleges and literary conferences. Her permanent residence is in Philadelphia with her daughter Savannah.

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