



Voices from the Gaps **Vg**

# Djanet Sears

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*I grew up in a society where I was considered a minority, minor, inferior, and somewhere along the line, I developed a type of internalized oppression. Although the ways in which each of us experiences internalized oppression are unique, no black person in this society has been spared. ‘Internalized racism’ has been the primary means by which we have been forced to perpetuate and ‘agree’ to our own oppression.*

— from the Afterward in Afrika Solo

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## Quick Facts

- \* Born in 1959
- \* Caribbean-Canadian playwright, director, and editor
- \* Author of *Afrika Solo* (1990)

## Biography

Djanet Sears was born Janet Sears in London, England to parents of Caribbean descent - her mother is Jamaican, and her father is Guyanese. She lived in England until 1974, when her family moved from London to Saskatoon, Saskatchewan in Canada. Her family then moved to Oakville, Ontario in 1975, and Djanet remained there until 1977. She then moved to Toronto, Ontario to attend York University and there received an Honours Bachelor of Fine Arts in Theatre. She has also studied at the Canadian Film Centre and New York University in New York. As an adult, she traveled to West Africa, where she came across a plateau area called Djanet. It was this that inspired her to change her name to Djanet and embrace her African ancestry. She is currently working as an adjunct professor at the University of Toronto, and has recently been involved as a Writer-in-Residence at the University of Guelph.

This page was researched and submitted by Annie Swerkstrom, Joelle Nelson, and Shelley Prieditis on 12/16/04.



# Djanet Sears

## Biography continued

Sears has earned international fame as a talented writer, director, and performer. She has written critically acclaimed plays, such as *Afrika Solo*, *Harlem Duet*, and *The Adventures of a Black Girl in Search of God* -- a work for which Sears won Canada's highest literary award, The Governor General's Literary Award, in 1998. She has directed and produced numerous other plays and has won several awards. Sears also belongs to a number of organizations, and is a founding member of the Obsidian Theatre in Toronto, a theatre dedicated to producing works by authors of African descent living or working in Canada. (\*Note: Information in the biography section came from direct communication with author)

### Literature Review and Critical Responses

Critics generally agree that Djanet Sears is a talented playwright who uses unique theatrical techniques to create "bold and daring" works. Jim Lingerfelt and Roger Kershaw state that Sears combines classical theatre with modern politics effectively to define the "black experience." For example, Sears often uses music to highlight themes about identity in her plays. The *Toronto Sun's* John Coulborn views her use of music and a 13-member chorus as a feat of talent that gives depth and rhythm to her work. In a review of *Harlem Duet*, critic Christopher Winsor notices the rich texture of her work gained by "conceptual layering" and gives the credit to various audio clips used throughout the play.

However, even those critics who praise Sears's work also point out that at times her plays can be "too theatrical" (Joel Greenberg). For example, in his review of *The Adventures of a Black Girl in Search of God*, Greenberg believes that some scenes suffer from "overstatement and a relentless earnestness." Winsor also finds certain sections to be over the top, calling them "overtly polemical and didactic" - and feels that her message may be more effective if her artistry was actually turned down a little at times. Matthew Murray finds a similar quality within the text of *Harlem Duet*, commenting that "her modern dialogue is much less effective, too often over descriptive and almost florid, undermining her point rather than emphasizing it."

Despite criticism that her stylistic choices can be a bit excessive, most critics agree that overall her creative artistic choices are beneficial to her work, and many critics feel it's the reason why she is becoming such a successful playwright. Lingerfelt and Kershaw reviewed *Harlem Duet* as "courageous theatre," obviously impressed with Sears's use of bold artistic components to emphasize themes in the play, and D. J. R. Bruckner praises the "undeniable emotional power" that is released as a result of her "dramatic impressionism."



# Djanet Sears

## Biography continued

### A Closer Look at the Plays

“[My writing] revolves around the process of understanding and exploring one’s own African heritage and one’s own Westernness.” - Djanet Sears.

Sears has written three full-length plays: *Afrika Solo*, *Harlem Duet*, and *The Adventures of a Black Girl in Search of God*. *Afrika Solo* is a semi-autobiographical play that tells the story of a young woman’s search to find herself and to come to terms with what she learns through her searching. It is a beautifully crafted work that blends different theatre techniques, such as a two man chorus accompanying the main character, and uses humor and irony to relay the experiences of Djanet, the young woman that is the center of the play’s focus.

The play begins with a somewhat somber African drumming incantation, but quickly shifts to a humorous mood when Djanet muses at the absurdity of the representation of blacks in popular television shows. As she discusses Tarzan, the male chorus chants in an imaginary gibberish, and later alternates between Baa Baa Black Sheep and Mary Had a Little Lamb. Sears explores her character’s formative years and, in turn, effectively shows how her journey across the globe aids in the finding of a resolution regarding issues that took root in those early years. While in Africa, Djanet sees many beautiful African women, and begins to feel at home in her skin. She no longer feels the need to live up to the North American pop culture’s ideal of beauty.

The mostly one-woman show is filled with both tender, introspective moments and lively, spirited musical interludes. Djanet retells the story of how she chose to change her name in a clever rap, while the male chorus provides the background beat. Throughout the play, Sears uses details to enhance her ideas and themes. In the last scene, Djanet is wearing jeans, a t-shirt, and a beautiful African head wrap. The image she leaves with her audience makes a statement about multicultural identity and self-discovery.



# Djanet Sears

## Biography continued

In *Harlem Duet*, a prelude to Shakespeare's *Othello*, Sears again uses specific details to enhance her plays themes. A cello and bass provide background music, and audio clips of African American leaders played throughout the play create thematic depth. The play's title reflects its primary setting: the corner of Martin Luther King and Malcolm X Boulevards. Sears chooses to set her play at this location because, as she explains, "I wanted an urban setting that would resonate for all North Americans, and because given that the play is an excavation of the question of importance of race, those boiling points appear to be more tangible in the U.S. than here. At 125th and 40th, there is an actual intersection that serves as the theoretical axis of the arguments in the play."

The play tells the story of Billie and Othello, and their dissolving marriage. As the play develops, Othello turns further away from his partner, and more towards the ideals of a white identity, mainly through his affair with 'Mona, a white woman who represents Shakespeare's character. As with in *Africa Solo*, in *Harlem Duet* Sears deals with the influence that a white-dominated, North American pop culture has on the psyche of the African American. Sears includes a wide range of prominent historical figures in her piece, such as Booker T. Washington and Jesse Jackson, emphasizing how these figures have fought against a white-dominated ideal. The author's characterization and intricately plot-woven ideas unfold with a great understanding of and relevance to cultural and identity issues. Sears not only deals with the individual's struggle, but also shines the spotlight on the importance of positive community leaders and progression. The play is most certainly Billie's, and not Othello's, a definite departure from Shakespeare's story. Through shifting the focus onto Billie, Sears opens the well-known story of *Othello* to interpretation, and forces audiences to think about both the causes and the effects that are present in human relations.

In *Harlem Duet*, Sears bestows upon her audience a very intelligent and thought-provoking piece of work. The present-day issue of human relations in North America is instantaneously raised and its position in the play is focused upon when the lives of the multi-racial characters are illustrated. Sears carefully establishes each character's place in the play with much consideration. They all present and uphold not only a distinctive voice, but also a caring and collective one as well.



# Djanet Sears

## Biography continued

*The Adventures of a Black Girl in Search of God* tells the story of Rainey, an African Canadian doctor, and her personal struggles in present-day Western Ontario. The play presents problems such as the death of Rainey's daughter, the deterioration of her marriage, and the tension between Rainey and her elderly father who, despite his age and poor health, participates in excursions within the community on a mission to maintain his ethnic pride. In her fast-paced and well-written play, Sears expertly captures human emotions, thoughts, and motives, and provides her audience with an engaging and intriguing story.

The play begins with an intense scene depicting the death of Rainey's daughter and the effect this has on Rainey. As a doctor, she begins to doubt herself and wonder if she should have been able to save her daughter. As a mother, she begins to doubt her faith in God, wondering why that God would take her daughter away from her. Like in her other plays, Sears soon adds warmth and humor to the play's issues, when she presents Rainey's father and his group of rebellious, elderly friends (in their first scene together, each one is comically wearing sunglasses). Throughout the play, this group of friends steals popular lawn ornaments that depict people of African descent in a degrading manner. Once again, Sears uses the themes of pop culture's influence on the African Canadian psyche, and also deals with the theme of the importance of community responsibility and unity in relation to progress.

Sears ends the play with Rainey feeling a ray of hope for the future. Though her father dies, she is able to better deal with her loss when it finally happens. Her husband Michael is there to comfort her, and as Rainey comes to terms with both her daughter's and father's deaths, she also begins to come to terms with life itself, and finally feels some conclusions in her search for answers. She comments to Michael, "People. That's all we have in this world really, isn't it?" (117), and Michael takes her into his arms.

There are central themes present in all of Sears's plays. The most obvious themes presented have to deal with race relations, with gender issues, with individual as well as collective identity searching, and with political action. All of Sears's main characters are women, and while most of their struggles are universal, they do face certain issues that are specific to being a woman. Rainey faces her role as a mother and wife, Djanet faces a battle with body image and beauty, and Billie faces a husband's infidelity.



# Djanet Sears

## Biography continued

All of Sears's characters confront a white-dominated culture, whether it be in the form of Djanet's relation to her surroundings in Canada as a child, or in Rainey's father's relation to the use of lawn ornaments and museum artifacts in his community. Politics are seen obviously when references to historic places and people are made in *Harlem Duet*, and as the African Canadian community fights City Council to keep the name of their local creek, Negro Creek.

Along with central themes, Sears threads her works together through the use of similar theatrical techniques. In each of the plays there is an element of background support. In *Afrika Solo*, it is in the form of the two-man chorus. In *Harlem Duet*, it comes through the use of a cello and bass, and through images projected on a screen. In *The Adventures of a Black Girl in Search of God*, it is with a 13-member chorus. These specific elements create depth and visual completion in already well-written pieces. Sears uses sparse, simple sets in each play to draw focus away from that which is inanimate, to that which is alive, and human. In all of her plays, the central themes and ideas are presented through the players themselves, which symbolizes an important ideal in Sears's work: necessity of action, and the essentiality of people. Through compelling writing, development of interesting characters and themes, balancing serious subject matter with humor, and using unique theatrical techniques, Djanet Sears has created a body of work that speaks to the individual and to the community.

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