

ON HER SHOULDERS is supported largely through tax-deductible gifts from individual supporters and the generous volunteer and in-kind contributions of the producing team (individuals and institutions). **Cash donations are gratefully accepted at the box office to help defray the cost of artist stipends and refreshments.**

FOR THE 2015-16 Series, we are again asking friends and colleagues to send a check or visit PayPal to make a more substantial donation that will allow us to continue this vital work! Checks should be made payable to New Perspectives Theatre Company noting OHS as the beneficiary, and mailed to: New Perspectives Theatre Company, 456 West 37th Street, New York, NY 10018.

Credit Card donations may be made at <http://www.nptnyc.org/programs/ONHERSHOULDERS.htm>

THE 2015-2016 SERIES

DATE	PLAY	AUTHOR	DIRECTOR	DRAMATURG
9/23/15	<i>Overtures</i> (1913) <i>Fourteen</i> (1920)	Alice Erya Gerstenberg	Melissa Attebery	Mari Lyn Henry
12/4/15	<i>House of Desires</i> (1683)	Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz	Melody Brooks	Heather Violanti
2/17/16	<i>Blue Blood</i> (1926), <i>Plumes</i> (1927), <i>Blue-Eyed Black Boy</i> (1930), <i>Starting Point</i> (1938)	Georgia Douglas Johnson	Elizabeth Van Dyke	Arminda Thomas
4/13/16	TBD	TBD	Melanie Sutherland	TBD

About the New School for Drama

The creative home for the future of performing arts. **Agile. Engaged. Innovative. Multi-disciplinary.** The New School for Drama is home to a dynamic group of young directors, writers, actors, creative technologists, and award-winning faculty. With a core belief in rigorous creativity and collaborative learning, our programs embrace civic awareness across performance disciplines to create work imbued with professionalism, imagination and social context. For more information, please visit www.newschool.edu/drama

The Play in Context, the dramaturgical and scholarly presentation component for all of the readings, is sponsored in part by the League of Professional Theatre Women, a not-for-profit organization promoting visibility and increasing opportunities for women in theatre since 1982. www.theatrewomen.org



ON HER SHOULDERS
New Perspectives Theatre Company
and The New School for Drama
present

Soul Struggle

Blue Blood (1926), *Blue-Eyed Black Boy* (1930),
Plumes (1927), *Starting Point* (1938)

with Poems and a Song

by

Georgia Douglas Johnson



Directed by Elizabeth Van Dyke
Dramaturgy by Arminda Thomas

Wednesday, February 17, 2016
The New School

Wollman Hall, 65 West 11th Street
New York, New York



Women have been writing plays and contributing to the Western Theatrical Canon for 1,000 years.

How many of the plays or playwrights can you name?

Total plays by women produced in commercial and regional theatres in the U.S. have remained below 20% for most of the 20th Century and now into the 21st. Yet many of these plays have been the most successful of their time, earning greater awards and box office income than their male counterparts.

At the first reading of **ON HER SHOULDERS** in May 2013, we surveyed the audience about their knowledge of the play and/or the playwright. Given that our audience is generally composed of theatre practitioners and those with an interest in women in theatre, the numbers were still shocking: only 40% had ever heard of Rachel Crothers; just 21% had read any of her plays, and only 7% had seen a production of one of them.

With a general audience, we can imagine that these numbers would be even worse!



The goal of **ON HER SHOULDERS** is to remedy this situation. By presenting staged readings of plays from across the spectrum of time and place, with contemporary dramaturges adapting them for modern audiences, we are making it impossible to deny or ignore the great tradition and value of women's contribution to the theatrical canon.

Through our reading series we intend to motivate producers and directors to champion and produce these brilliant plays in New York and regionally, and to incite audiences to demand to see them.

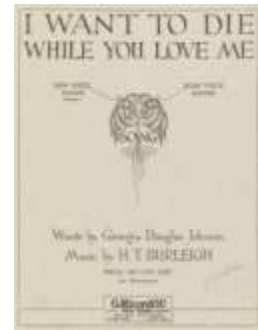
In making history visible, we also shine the light on today's women playwrights and see their work as part of a continuum a thousand years long. They stand on the shoulders of giants--and in restoring our foremothers to their rightful place, we elevate all women playwrights.



ON HER SHOULDERS is also aligned with the goals and projects of 50/50 in 2020: Parity for Women Theatre Artists. This grassroots initiative was launched in August 2009 to work toward 50% representation for women playwrights and directors by the 100th Anniversary of Women's Suffrage in the U.S.

NEW PERSPECTIVES THEATRE COMPANY (NPTC) is an award-winning, multi-racial company performing in the Theatre District and in communities throughout New York City. Our mission is to develop and produce new plays and playwrights, especially women and people of color, to present classic plays in a style that addresses contemporary issues, and to extend the benefits of theatre to young people and communities in need. **Our aim is not to exclude, but to cast a wider net.** Now in its 25th season, notable NPTC productions have included *Richard III*, starring Austin Pendleton; *Exhibit #9* by Tracy Scott Wilson (1999 Audeco Award); *Jihad* by Ann Chamberlain (OOBR Award for Best Production); *The Taming of the Shrew* (OOBR Award for Best Production), *Admissions* by Tony Velella (10 Best Plays Backstage); the U.S. premiere of *Visit* by renowned Argentinean playwright Ricardo Monti; and the New York Premieres of Vaclav Havel's *The Increased Difficulty of Concentration*, OBIE-Winner Stephanie Berry's *The Shaneequa Chronicles* (produced with Blackberry Productions), *Lemon Meringue Façade* by Ted Lange, and *MOTHER OF GOD!* by Michele Miller (Finalist, Princess Grace Foundation Award). www.nptnyc.org

When her husband died in 1925, Johnson's popularity as a writer was at its peak. But now, at 45 years old, in order to support her two sons, she had to work temp jobs as a substitute public school teacher and a file clerk for the Civil Service. She did some hack writing, using a variety of pen names, which unfortunately rendered much of her work lost to future generations. She finally found stable work with the Commissioner of Immigration for the Department of Labor, where the hours were long and the pay low, but she still managed to help put her sons through college, then through law school and medical school, while continuing to host the Saturday Nighters.



In 1926, she began to write plays with female central characters. Most of them were thrown away after her death by family members who did not understand their importance. According to her "Catalogue of Writings," which she put together in 1962/63, she wrote 28 plays, including those read tonight.

Johnson was also a key advocate in the anti-lynching movement and so was a pioneering member of the lynching drama tradition. Six of her plays, including *A Sunday Morning in the South* and *Blue-Eyed Black Boy*, were written as activist pieces in the campaign against lynching, although none was published or produced during her lifetime. Although she was involved in their anti-lynching campaigns of 1936 and 1938, the NAACP refused to produce many of her plays, claiming they gave a feeling of hopelessness, which was her intention as she did not feel hopefulness was a realistic outcome.

Her third volume of poetry, *An Autumn Love Cycle* (1928), is considered to be her best and focuses on love later in life. Johnson traveled extensively in the late 1920s, giving lectures and readings, wrote a weekly newspaper column, "Homely Philosophy," that was syndicated by twenty publications between 1926 and 1932, and organized and ran an international correspondence club from 1930 to 1965.

Her "Catalogue of Writings" also noted over 200 poems, 31 short stories, a book-length manuscript about her literary salon, a novel and a biography of her late husband. Of the 31 short stories, only three have been located, under the pseudonym of Paul Tremaine. It's possible that this missing material was also thrown away after her death.

Her catalogue notes that she also wrote and produced at least two dozen "written and copyrighted" songs, including a "Georgia State College School Song" (for what would become Savannah State University). She even collaborated with the classical singer and composer Lillian Evanti on several published pieces in the late 1940s.

Johnson self-published her final book of poetry, *Share My World*, in 1962. Influenced by the wisdom gained over a lifetime, these poems deal with the oneness of humankind and contain generous forgiveness and a love towards all.

In 1965, in recognition of her meaningful achievements and their reflection upon "her native city, her alma mater, her race, and humanity," Atlanta University presented Johnson with an honorary doctorate of literature. She died shortly thereafter in 1966 in Washington, D.C. In September 2009, Johnson was inducted into the Georgia Writers Hall of Fame.

So Much Lost, But Not Forgotten
by Melissa Attebery



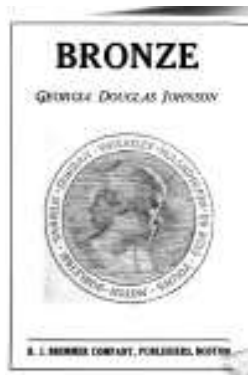
We know that Georgia Blanche Douglas Camp Johnson was born on September 10th in Atlanta, GA, to parents of African-American, Native American, and English descent, but the actual year of her birth, some time between the years of 1877 and 1887, has been lost to history. She may have intentionally concealed her age, but the loss of this detail is more reflective of the difficulties she faced as a woman, an African American and an artist in a time when expectations directly conflicted with but could not suppress her calling. In spite of these obstacles, she became the best known and most widely published African-American woman poet of the Harlem Renaissance, as well as an accomplished playwright and journalist.

She graduated from the Normal School of Atlanta University sometime between 1893 and 1896, and for about ten years, taught school in Atlanta and Marietta. She was a self-taught violinist and church organist and went on to formally study music at the Oberlin Conservatory of Music and the Cleveland College of Music (and possibly at Howard University in Washington, D.C., although this detail is also lost to history).

She fell in love with Henry Lincoln Johnson, a prominent attorney and Republican politician, who expected her to become a housewife and take primary responsibility for raising their children, so she resigned her position as a school principal to marry him in 1903. Encouraged by poet William Stanley Braithwaite, she published her first poem in 1905 in the anthology *Voice of the Negro* and began to take herself seriously as a poet. She gave birth to two sons in 1906 and 1907, then, looking to establish his own law firm, her husband moved them all to Washington, D.C., where he was later appointed by President Taft to the position of Recorder of Deeds..

Her busy life as a politician's wife and mother didn't leave a lot of time for writing, but it did broaden her view of the world, as she came into contact with the Black elite society of Washington, including writer Jean Toomer. Determined to express her art, in 1916, she managed to get three of her poems published in *The Crisis*, the official magazine of the NAACP. She published her first volume of poetry, *The Heart of a Woman*, in 1918, expressing the sorrowful voice of an artist whose talents never fully developed due to the conventions of her time. Her second volume, *Bronze* (1922), clarified this internalization of a diminished existence, thus establishing her as an important female African-American poet.

In the early 1920s, Toomer encouraged Johnson to host a weekly open house at her now historic home at 1461 S Street NW. These meetings of the "Saturday Nighters" allowed her to showcase her gracious hospitality, which pleased her husband, but more importantly, enhanced her standing among the notable African-American writers of the time. The "S Street Salon," as it came to be known, was a "safe and supportive" atmosphere "where Harlem Renaissance writers struggled with their literary work and where that work found its first audience." Johnson called it her "Half-Way House," because she was always willing to shelter artists in need, including, at one point, Zora Neale Hurston. S Street became one of the greatest literary salons of the Harlem Renaissance.



ON HER SHOULDERS

presents

Soul Struggle:
Works by Georgia Douglas Johnson

BLUE BLOOD

May
Mrs. Bush
Mrs. Temple
Randolph

Chrystal Bethell
Richarda Abrams*
Kim Weston Moran*
Larry Floyd*

PLUMES

Charity
Tildy
Emmerline
Dr. Scott

Lynette Freeman*
M. Drue Williams*
Chrystal Bethell
Roger Parris

BLUE EYES

Pauline
Rebecca
Hester
Dr. Grey

Richarda Abrams
Chrystal Bethell
Kim Weston Moran
Larry Floyd

STARTING POINT

Henry
Tom
Mother
Belle

Roger Parris
Larry Floyd*
M. Drue Williams
Lynette Freeman

POEMS

The Heart of a Woman Company
I Want To Die While You Still Love Me

SONG

I Want To Die While You Still Love Me Richarda Abrams

*Member AEA

Please join us after the reading for a Play in Context discussion and a glass of wine

ELIZABETH VAN DYKE's directing credits include: *Gem of The Ocean* (Superior Award from Assoc. of Colleges) *The Ballad of Emmett Till* (Gorgee Award, Best Director), *Gee's Bend*, *From Sun To Sun*; *Great Men Of Gospel: Spirit Into Sound* (AUDELCO NOMINATION, Best Director), *A Raisin In The Sun*, *Waiting To Be Invited*, *The Piano Lesson*, *Sophisticated Ladies*, (ONYX Award Best Director & Best Musical Production of The Year), *The Old Settler*, *Sweet Mama Stringbean*, *For Colored Girls*, *Ti Jean And His Brothers*, and *Remembering Weselves: The Black Renaissance* by the late Amiri Baraka. Ms. Van Dyke serves as Producing Artistic Director of "Going to the River" and "The River Crosses Rivers: A Festival of Short Plays by Women of Color," based at EST. She is on the Board of New Federal Theatre and a member of AEA, SAG, AFTRA, SDC, The Dramatist Guild, The Playwrights Center, and The League of Professional Theatre Women. She received the Roy Acuff Chair of Excellence in Theatre at Austin Peay State University, The Board of Directors Award from AUDELCO, The President's Award from the Black Theatre Network, A Fox Foundation Grant, and a Rockefeller Grant.

ARMINDA THOMAS served as dramaturg and archivist for Dee-Davis Enterprises, where her production dramaturgy credits include Ossie Davis' *A Last Dance for Sybil* (New Federal Theatre) and Ruby Dee's musical adaptation of *John Boscoe and the Devil* (EST's Going to the River festival). Additional dramaturgy credits include *The First Noel* (Classical Theatre of Harlem), *Shakespeare's Women* (Hattiloo, Memphis), *Bitter Fruit* (San Francisco), and the Obie-award winning production of *June and Jean in Concert* (Signature Theatre). She also served as archival consultant for the documentary *Life's Essentials With Ruby Dee* and executive producer for the Grammy-award winning audio book *With Ossie and Ruby: In This Life Together* (Hachette). Ms. Thomas holds an MFA in dramaturgy and script development from Columbia University.

GEORGIA DOUGLAS JOHNSON: From Poet to Playwright by Arminda Thomas

By the time Georgia Douglas Johnson turned her hand to playwriting, she was already recognized as a major poetic voice in the New Negro movement (which would in time be called the Harlem Renaissance). She had published two books of poetry, *The Heart of a Woman* (1918) and *Bronze* (1922), and her poems regularly appeared in the NAACP's *Crisis* and the National Urban League's *Opportunity* magazines. In addition, her weekly informal gatherings of artists, intellectuals and activists were fast making her Washington D.C. home ("The Half-Way

House," she called it) a destination spot in African-American civic and cultural life—a place where Langston Hughes and Wallace Thurman could dream up a literary magazine for more experimental writing, where A. Philip Randolph could make his case for unionizing sleeping-car porters to the city's disapproving black elite, and where Carter G. Woodson (educator and organizer of Negro History Week) could convince playwrights May Miller and Willis Richardson to curate an anthology "dramatizing every phase of

[Negro] life and history" as a learning tool for African-American schoolchildren. That book, *Negro History in Thirteen Plays*, included two of Johnson's works.

Johnson's entry into playwriting was encouraged by various friends, including Zona Gale (the first woman to be awarded the Pulitzer Prize in drama), Alain Locke, curator and herald of the New Negro movement, and NAACP co-founder W.E.B. Du Bois. The rise of the Little Theatre movement, along with the trend towards serious dramas focused on the lives of common people—including "Negroes"—had created an opportunity for the birth of an authentic African American drama, which Locke, Du Bois and others in the community were eager to encourage (though they often differed on the form that drama should take). To that end, *Opportunity* and *Crisis* magazines began offering playwriting contests with cash prizes; and in order to provide a venue (and, it was hoped, to build an audience) for the works, small theatre groups sprouted up in African American communities, schools, and organizations across the country.

The short lifespan (and dearth of record-keeping) for many of these venues, along with the destruction of most of Johnson's own papers after her death, makes it difficult to say with certainty how many of Johnson's plays received productions in her lifetime. It seems clear, however, that two of her earliest plays were her most "successful" in terms of publications and acclamation.

Blue Bloods, a one-act comedy that manages to tackle the absurdity of colorism in the context of sexual exploitation, was awarded honorable mention in *Opportunity's* 1926 contest. It was published as a single play by Appleton-Century and subsequently anthologized in Alain Locke and Montgomery Gregory's *Plays of Negro Life* (1927) and in Frank Shay's *50 More Contemporary One-Act Plays* (1938). *Blue Blood* was staged by Du Bois' Krigwa Players in New York in 1927 and by the Howard University Players in 1933.

Johnson's next play, *Plumes*, was also well received. After taking first place in *Opportunity's* contest, *Plumes* was published by Samuel French in 1927 and later appeared in Locke and Gregory's anthology, as well as V.F. Calverton's *Anthology of American Negro Literature*. Set in the rural south, *Plumes* brings us an impoverished woman struggling to choose whether to spend her life's savings on a surgery that might possibly save her beloved daughter's life – or to save the money for the daughter's funeral. It was produced by the Harlem Experimental Theatre

(1927) and Chicago's Cube Theater (1928). Aside from the two pieces included in Richardson and Miller's historical drama anthology, *Plumes* and *Blue Blood* were the only plays to be published in Johnson's lifetime.

As the 1920s gave way to the bleaker '30s, the Harlem Renaissance began to lose steam. *Crisis* and *Opportunity* turned their focus away from the arts. The Krigwa Players and Harlem Experimental Theatre disbanded. The opportunities for playwrights to see their work staged were dwindling. Langston Hughes recalled:

We were no longer in vogue, anyway, we Negroes. Sophisticated New Yorkers turned to Noel Coward. Colored actors began to go hungry, publishers politely rejected new manuscripts, and patrons found other uses for their money.ⁱ

Some relief came in the form of the Federal Theatre Project, which was created to ease the high levels of unemployment in the arts communities. The FTP even established Negro Troupes in several cities. The plays Johnson submitted to the FTP met with mixed reviews, and ultimately none were selected for production. Her plays about lynching met with particular criticism: some objected to the static nature of the pieces, as Johnson's plays were all set away from the murderous crowds in an effort to hone in on the effect the barbaric practice had on the victims' family, friends and neighbors. Another remarked disapprovingly that Johnson trivialized the offences that led to lynching, when "in fact the crime that produces lynching is far fouler."ⁱⁱⁱ

The lynching plays also met resistance where she might have expected none. When Johnson sent her lynching plays to NAACP Executive Secretary Walter White for possible production by the Youth Council, he replied that the Council had rejected the pieces because "they all ended in defeat." Johnson replied, "It is true that in life things don't end usually ideally."^{iv} In this more recent era of unwarranted police shootings caught on video, of the Black Lives Matter movement, some theatre groups have revisited Johnson's lynching plays. Theater for a New City included one, *The Blue-Eyed Black Boy*, in a 2015 production of "lost" one-acts from the Harlem Renaissance. Of the six lynching plays that Johnson penned, this play comes closest to White's desired triumphant ending. The mother is able, in the end, to convince someone to save her son—though the reason she succeeds is not ideal.

In one of her later plays, *The Starting Point* (1938), Johnson captures the heartbreak and disappointment of an elderly couple who have invested all their hopes and treasure on a beloved son, only to have him squander it all. In order to save him, they must convince him to accept a life of radically diminished expectations. It is a work that may well reflect the disappointment that Johnson and others of her generation experienced as the post-Renaissance years left most of them scrambling for opportunities that had once seemed certain. Still, there is resilience in the old couple, as there was in their creator, who continued to write—and to nurture and champion other writers—for the rest of her life.

ⁱ Carter G. Woodson, "Introduction" in *Negro History in Thirteen Plays*, ed. Willis Richardson and May Miller (Washington, D.C.: The Associated Publishers, 1935), v.

ⁱⁱ Langston Hughes, *The Big Sea* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1940), 334.

ⁱⁱⁱ Kathy A. Perkins and Louise Stephens, eds., *Strange Fruit: Plays on Lynching By American Women* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994), 100.

^{iv} Judith L. Stephens, "Introduction" in *The Plays of Georgia Douglas Johnson: From the New Negro Renaissance to the Civil Rights Movement*, (Urbana & Chicago: Illinois University Press, 2006), 36.

