

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 2014-15 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 2014-15 SERIES

DATE	PLAY	AUTHOR	DIRECTOR	DRAMATURG
10/1/14	<i>The Office</i> (1966)	Maria Irene Fornes	Alice Reagan	Morgan Jenness
12/17/14	<i>Chicago</i> (1926)	Maurine Dallas Watkins	Melody Brooks	Mari Lyn Henry
2/18/15	The Suffrage Plays	various	Melissa Attebery	Barbara Cohen-Stratynner, Ph. D.
4/15/15	Spunk	Zora Neale Hurston	Aneesha Kudtarkar	Sadah "Espii" Proctor
6/17/15	TBD	TBD	TBD	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

SPUNK

by Zora Neale Hurston



Directed by Aneesha Kudtarkar
 Dramaturgy by Sadah "Espii" Proctor

Wednesday, April 15, 2015

The New School

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



The New School for Drama

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 23rd season**, notable NPTC productions have included *Richard III*, starring Austin Pendleton; *Exhibit #9* by Tracy Scott Wilson (**1999 Audelco 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 Shanteequa 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



This divide is where Hurston was at odds with her colleagues of the Harlem Renaissance. A native Southerner, she grew up in an incorporated, all-black town. She came from a rich family and felt empowered by the black self-government around her. She didn't feel underprivileged or like a minority. While Hurston's contemporaries were reinventing the image of the Negro and exposing the discrimination he faced in the country, Hurston herself, never having felt slighted because of her race, opposed

this approach. In her letter, *How It Feels To Be Colored Me*, she stated, "There is no great sorrow dammed up in my soul, nor lurking behind my eyes. I do not mind at all. I do not belong to the 40 sobbing school of Negrohood who hold that nature somehow has given them a low-down dirty deal and whose feelings are all hurt about it."

SPUNK has all the elements that belong to a traditional love story. Boy meets girl, and they fall in love; someone/something threatens to tear them apart; and despite the odds, they come together in the end. The remarkable thing about SPUNK is that it is a love story sprinkled with aspects of southern, African-American culture. There is talk about conjuring and hoodoo, new beginnings and the church, the nonchalant attitudes of whites towards African Americans when there is "order," blues music and the rich use of dialect by all of the characters. There is no idealistic picture of life in SPUNK nor any lamentation on any existing conditions. Everything exists as it is. Hurston forged her own path during the Harlem Renaissance by holding onto what she loved and grew up with in Eatonville. What was seen as "the old ways" by many African Americans during the Great Migration was brought to light in her work, and rather than looking down the road to the future, Hurston's work held a mirror up to African-American culture in her present time. This approach of immersing her audience into her world made her a noted figure, but it cost her popularity.



Today, we honor Zora Neale Hurston for shedding light on different components of the African diaspora, remaining true to her own vision of the world in which she lived and for being bold enough to express it publicly.



Zora Neale Hurston: A Genius of the South

by Sadah "Espii" Proctor



Zora Neale Hurston was the “Queen of the Harlem Renaissance.” A folklorist, anthropologist, and writer, Hurston integrated traditional African-American folklore into her writing. She lived during the Great Migration, when millions of African Americans moved from the South to the North for a better economic and social life. Unlike other Harlem Renaissance writers who focused on the African-American experience in the North, she centered many of her stories on life in the

South. The subjects she covered led to conflicts and disagreements with her contemporaries resulting in a decline in her popularity.

Although she was born in Notasulga, Alabama in 1891, Zora Neale Hurston claimed in her autobiography, *Dust Tracks on the Road* (1942), that she was born in Eatonville, Florida in 1901. Hurston did not live in Eatonville until she was thirteen, when she moved there with her mother and father. Eatonville’s status as the first incorporated all-black town in the country provided Hurston cultural inspiration for her stories surrounding black, rural life in the South. Hurston’s upbringing in this self-governed town impacted her attitude about the boundaries in everyday rural African-American life, from self-determination to segregation to what was deemed “respectable” black art.



Hurston’s parents were two former slaves: Lucy Ann Potts and John Hurston. Hurston’s mother died in 1904. Her father, a pastor, remarried after her mother’s death. Hurston spent the remainder of her childhood living with different family members and touring with a theatre troupe. She completed high school work at Morgan State University (then called Morgan Academy) in 1918, graduated from Howard University with an associate’s degree in 1920, and entered Barnard College in New York to study anthropology in 1925. Hurston completed her bachelor’s degree at Barnard and went on to graduate school at Columbia University.

Hurston experienced life in New York during the height of the Harlem Renaissance — a period of rebirth in African-American music, poetry, art and writing. She became acquainted with other figures like Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, Wallace Thurman and Alain Locke, who dubbed the Harlem Renaissance the “New Negro Movement,” a term indicating the new class and sophistication that African Americans were hoping to present in their lives and works at the turn of the century.

In 1926, Hurston joined with Hughes and Thurman to create *Fire!!*, a quarterly literary magazine reflecting the African-American experience during the Harlem Renaissance.



Among many topics, it covered relationships, sexuality and intraracial prejudices. The magazine had poor sales and faced criticism that it did not fit with the “New Negro” image that African Americans wanted to portray in Harlem. Financial problems, coupled with the headquarters burning down, forced *Fire!!* to cease operations the same year, after publishing only one issue.

Hurston also began to clash with other writers of the Harlem Renaissance on the image of the “New Negro.” Rather than adhere to the idealized image or focus on contentious issues facing the community, Hurston connected with African-American folklore and blues from the South in her work. In her most famous novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), she was criticized for trying too hard to appeal to whites, even though her immersion in folklore culture left a disconnect between her and white audiences. Her colleagues felt that she was utilizing minstrelsy images within language and dialect. In a letter she wrote to Countee Cullen in 1943, Hurston fired back at her critics, stating:



“Just point out that we are suffering injustices and denied our rights, as if the white people did not know that already! Why don’t I put something about lynchings in my books? As if all the world did not know about Negroes being lynched! My stand is this: either we must do something about it that the white man will understand and respect, or shut up. No whiner ever got any respect or relief. If some of us must die for human justice, then let us die. For my own part, this



poor body of mine is not so precious that I would not be willing to give it up for a good cause. But my own self-respect refuses to let me go to the mourner’s bench.”

Hurston studied various parts of the African diaspora in her anthropological research. Awarded a Guggenheim fellowship, she traveled to Jamaica and Haiti to study the folk religion Obeah. The Federal Writers Project also commissioned her to study African-American culture in Florida. Hurston had a fascination for conjure and voodoo culture that was prevalent in the South, particularly Louisiana and her hometown, Eatonville. She published her findings in works like *Mules and Men*, on African-American folklore; *Tell My Horse*, on her research about Obeah; *Seraph on the Swannee*, on the Diaspora experience in Honduras; and *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, which she wrote during her travels to Haiti.

Hurston faced financial problems toward the end of her life. She worked as a maid and journalist in Florida in the 1950s. Unfortunately, she suffered a stroke in 1959 and had to move into the St. Lucie County Welfare Home. On January 28, 1960, Zora Neale Hurston died of heart disease. She died alone, and because she had no money, was buried in an unmarked grave in her hometown of Eatonville, Florida. In 1973, writer Alice Walker rediscovered and brought attention back to Hurston’s body of work. And in honor of the great writer and woman, Walker bought a headstone for Hurston’s grave that read, “Zora Neale Hurston: A Genius of the South.”



A Love Story, Plain and Simple
by Sadah "Espii" Proctor

When I went to school at Virginia Tech, I resided in a region called the New River Valley. It was a small segment of the Blue Ridge Mountains, which was part of an even larger range called the Appalachian Mountains. During my time there, I worked with local community members in a theatre project where people shared their stories about the region. We set time aside in the theatre to talk about their upbringing, their issues, their concerns and their ambitions. One of the ways we explored this was through music. I learned about how blues became bluegrass and eventually country music. I learned about how things were left behind as the music evolved. Instruments (the banjo, guitar), the "twang" and oral tradition became exaggerated stereotypes. Country music, distant from its ancestor, became a commodity to be bought and sold.



I think about how blues and jazz have this same relationship. While the blues emerged from African-American folk culture, jazz re-appropriated elements of the blues with "white" instruments: the piano, the trumpet, horns, etc. Blues focused on individual improvisation, while jazz had a set structure that a group could improvise within. Blues was mainly vocal, while jazz was instrumental. The heart of blues remained in the South and jazz became all the rage up North. Blues was something sung in the fields;

jazz, on the other hand, had more commercial appeal.

During Zora Neale Hurston's time, the Great Migration was under way. Between 1910 and 1970, over six million African Americans moved from the South to the North. People moved to escape Jim Crow, to seek better economic opportunities with factory jobs and to exercise a new sense of freedom. Slavery was over. One of the significant things about the Harlem Renaissance was that its pioneers sought to create what they dubbed a "New Negro Movement"—the opportunity to reinvent the Negro as "sophisticated" and "educated." They sought to leave old things behind and embrace the new culture birthed in the North. Writers chronicled the struggles of the African-American condition in the North, the clashes that they faced with whites over jobs, segregation, justice and the lack of social and economic equality. African-American culture down South became "mammified" with the creation of minstrel shows. Accents were exaggerated, features were made fun of and even the blues tradition of singing and working were made into negative images that African-Americans up North wanted to abandon.



ON HER SHOULDERS

presents

SPUNK

by Zora Neale Hurston

Directed by **Aneesha Kudtarkar**
Dramaturgy by **Sadah "Espii" Proctor**

CAST

Spunk
Evalina
Jim
Hodge Bishop
Ruby
Teazie
Daisy
Mrs. Watson
Nunkie
Oral
Blue Trout

Beethoven Oden*
Mia Antoinette Crowe
Jakeem Powell
William Sinclair Moore
Althea Alexis*
Shykia Fields
Shannon Harris*
Tamu Favorite*
Charles Browning*
William Smith
Phillip Gregory Burke*

* Member AEA

Stage Directions read by Steven Smith

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

ANEESHA KUDTARKAR (*Director*) is a Dallas native and graduate of Southern Methodist University's BFA program. Previous directing credits include: *Sex* by Mae West (On Her Shoulders), *One Universal You* (Alvin Ailey Auditorium), *Happy Hanukah* (INTAR's American Nightcap), *Gruesome Playground Injuries* (Studio @ 620), *Living Out*, *Animals Out of Paper*, and *Ninety* (SMU) She has assistant directed at various institutions including, The Juilliard School, Signature Theatre Company, Westport Country Playhouse, and Studio Theatre in DC. Aneesha is so pleased to be a part of the producing body of On Her Shoulders.

SADAH "ESPII" PROCTOR (*Dramaturg*) a writer, dramaturg and performer. Focusing on new play development, devised theatre and intermedia performance, her work explores themes of womanism, social justice, rhythm and movement, and cultural aspects of the African Diaspora. She recently served as dramaturg during the developmental lab of *Project Unspeakable* (Convergences Theatre Collective) and a staged reading of *The Cherry Orchard* (Zeitgeist Reads). She is a member of the Literary Managers and Dramaturgs of the Americas (LMDA), the Literary Committee for Urban Stages, and Downtown Art as a singer in the Bowery Birds. Espii is also the Founder/Editor-in-Chief of *hep.beat.zine*, an online blog dedicated to artists of color.