

## Drama or Performance Art? An Interview with Ntozake Shange

Serena Anderlini

Shange was born Paulette Williams and is the author of a number of performance pieces. Many were experimental and improvised, but all are poetic and literary. Some have been produced also in commercial theatres; *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf* (1976); *a photograph: lovers in motion* (1979); *boogie woogie landscapes* (1978); *spell#7* (1979). Less commercially successful pieces are: *negress* (1977); *where the mississippi meets the amazon* (1977); *from okra to greens: a different love story* (1978). She is also the author of dramatic adaptations, including a *Mother Courage* in which a black woman lives in the American frontier during Indian wars; and an *Educating Rita* in which an Afro-American Rita speaks a black vernacular. In-progress performance pieces are: *The Jazz Life*; *Black and Blue Valentines*; *Bosoms and Mares: Riding the Moon in East Texas*; and *Smoke Voices*. Shange is the author of two novels: *Sassafrass, Cypress and Indigo* (1982); and *Betsey Brown* (1985); she wrote the libretto for the opera *Betsey Brown*; *nappy edges*, a collection of poems (1978); and *See no Evil*, a collection of essays (1983). Shange hardly ever uses capital letters.

Shange was part of the first Afro-American generation educated in a de-segregated environment. She grew up in a professional middle-class family. During the Civil Rights Movement and the process of de-segregation of public life that accompanied it, her parents moved several times between the north and the south. She was in a position to attend a prestigious school, Barnard College, hitherto only for whites. She graduated *cum laude*. Soon after she moved to California where she was part of the west coast cultural movement to rediscover the body and physicality. She became a dancer and one of the founders of a new artistic form, 'performance art.' She also devoted her energies to the study of women and Africa. She adopted her Zulu name at this time: a symbolic elision of slavery and patriarchy from her artistic consciousness, it represented her search for identity in a pre-colonial African past. 'She who comes with her own things' and 'she who walks like a lion,'

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express her desire to interpret the rise of a collective black-female consciousness at the time.

Her poetic style is mimetic of the orality of contemporary American English; it evokes the aggressiveness, complexity, and intensity of American life. 'Performance art' is the art form she finds most congenial to her talent. It combines elements of theatre, dance, music, poetry and the visual arts in a theatrical representation that takes place in the settings of real life, such as bars, parks, piazzas. A 'performance' is unique, free of charge, unrepeatable, and to some extent improvised. Not a finished, saleable object, the 'performance piece' is ephemeral--a memory rather than a text, an event rather than a product. Shange thinks that 'performance art' frees the artist from the mechanism of the production system. However, significant performance pieces became theatrical productions, including some of Shange's.

On the page, Shange's performance pieces are experimental verse dramas. Note-like format ostends the performative origin of the poems that compose the drama. Orality is rendered by spellings that resemble pre-school 'sounding out.' Emotion is expressed through calligraphic page lay-outs and through upper-case lines. Lower-case letters undermine ideological constructs: an example is the phallic image of the English first person pronoun spelled "i". Slashes in the verse line mark rhythms of physical aggression and verbal seduction.

Shange's audience has expanded from west-coast minority women to a larger public: the poems of *nappy edges* had a mainly female Afro-American readership. [*C*]olored girls was a popular success that turned the author into a celebrity. Critical recognition came with *Betsey Brown*. My interest in her work stemmed from the autobiography in her writing; this spoke of a woman who lived intensely, something I admired. Among other things, this conversation focuses on her preoccupation with form and with permanence in art. Shange stressed her commitment to the present; however a desire to defy mortality through art emerges between the lines. As the tape went off she said 'this is now yours, do what you want with it, it is no longer mine.'

In her Family during the Civil Rights Movement

Anderlini - You grew up partly in the north and partly in the south, in a family of professionals, who had a racial consciousness and were artistically inclined. Would you like to talk about it?

Shange - The neighborhood where we grew up during segregation--as if there wasn't any now!--had Haitians, Nigerians, people from Togo, Jamaica, Panama, Costa Rica, East India, the Philippines and Japan. We all had to live with each other because we couldn't live with the white people: my friends' parents were from countries that were still colonies. When we were almost teen-agers

these countries attained so-called independence: we experienced colonial history; my parents told us about it, but it was also all around us.

Anderlini - What about black American history?

Shange - My parents used to be called 'race people.' Life was dedicated to the betterment of the race; heroes or achievers of any kind were seen in terms of how they portrayed the race in the eyes of the Anglo, who saw us as 'Sambo.' Black people a generation or two before me found 'Sambo's' images embarrassing--not realizing that maybe that art form was the foundation of what came after. Before the baby-boom--before those of us who were born during world war two and after--'Sambo' types were all there was. There was no respect for black opera singers, for black poets.

Paul Lawrence Dunbar is a genius because of his dialect poems; but he was most proud of a sonnet he wrote because that to him meant that he was a poet: he could not accept that his dialect poems were classics, and they would remain so forever. There was so much prejudice and make-believe about black people at that time that the only way he could respect himself as a writer was by writing sonnets; that to me is very painful. I was raised to listen to his dialect poems, and Langston Hughes' and Chuck Berry's. I was raised hearing it and knowing about it.

The people that I come from on my mother's side of the family are called Geechees, from the area that goes from North Carolina to South Georgia. Geechees are very proud and very separate. They have a language, a culture, food, caste and class. You never stop being a Geechee; you never stop being a Carolinian. Immediately after the civil war black south-Carolinians had the highest literacy rate of any slaves following emancipation. Geechees are a very arrogant, insular community; some are blue-black, and some are like me. But they accept that, which seems interesting to me. They speak a language called Gullah, that my grandmother could speak.

Anderlini - Can you describe it?

Shange - Gullah is slave-trade language, like Papiamentu. There is Portuguese, French, Spanish, English and African. It is the language of the slave traders and Africans, all mixed up together. The syntax is very strange. At least in Gullah and Papiamentu--where they are the same--the rhythmic pulses of the sentences are African. But the places of the adjectives, or of the verbs are probably European, although it would be a mixture of, say, three languages.

Anderlini - Do you speak French?

Shange - Yes, French, Spanish and Portuguese.

Anderlini - Did you learn French as a child?

Shange - Yes. My mother told us that we could go anywhere in the world if we spoke French, which is true particularly in Africa. But I think that in the new world there were enough of us (third-world people, or people of color) to feel a sense of richness and nourishment, and that's why I learned Spanish. More people who were slaves speak Spanish than they speak English. If I wanted to be related to people like me--as opposed to Africans who were not part of the slave trade--I had to learn the foreign languages of the new world. I did that as an adult.

This is related to my identity crisis: the only thing I knew is that I was 'a child of the new world.' There is a propensity among Anglos or Europeans to see us Afro-Americans with some kind of boundaries, and not understand that for a child of the diaspora--which for us is slave trade--there are no national boundaries. I can decide to discuss Chile or to write about Cuba, and I do not feel that I am a 'tourist.' When there are black people, I know how to dance, I know the rhythms, I know the food, I know how to have comradeship, and I can talk, and sing.

Anderlini - At what point of your life did you have frictions with your family?

Shange - I was embarrassed to be a middle class person at a time when the black proletariat was so active; the black people I was around were having bridge parties. Everybody in New York and Washington was burning down the city!

Anderlini - What were the expectations that your family set on you?

Shange - They wanted me to go to a seven sister college, graduate *cum laude*, marry a nice doctor and have five children and a wonderful house; and belong to a wonderful black Civic Group, go to church and raise my kids.

Anderlini - From today's perspective, how do you look back to that rejection of middle-class values?

Shange - I owe my parents most of what I am, a sense of value, a sense of responsibility to the race in some sense. Some people might think that I am 'a doctor's daughter,' and I have been privileged, true, but I also know how to get from Little Italy through Little Puerto Rico, to midtown to where the 'niggers' are. By myself. Without getting killed. And somebody said 'I'll give you some credit,' because there is not one scar in my face.

I am part of the same race as my family, but don't do the same things my mother does for 'the race.' I work with the Nicaraguan government in the

literacy campaign, and with the *Trabajadores Liberales* in Cuba, Panama and Guatemala. I write things that I would call 'cultural aggression.'

Anderlini - Were you raised in any faith?

Shange - I was raised as a Presbyterian, a Congregational and a Unitarian. All of which I rejected as entirely too intellectual. Now I am active as a Methodist Episcopalian, and I also practice Santaria, which is a religion based on Catholic and Yoruban belief systems.

Afro-American Identity and colored girls

Anderlini - Speaking about *colored girls*, years ago you said that it was a 'distillation of years of work in common.' What do you think today?

Shange - The collective effort was that of 20 to 30 feminist writers in the San Francisco Bay area, to remedy and explain, explicate and extrapolate our situation as women. That was the collective effort. The work itself is individual. The stamina and the courage--if there is courage involved in it to tackle issues that might be painful or unattractive--comes from that collective effort, but the work itself is individual. Judy Grahn, Susan Griffin, Sonia Sanchez, Janice Marcantoni, Jessica Hagedorn, we were a collection of black, Asian and native American women working at the same time. We read our works at the same readings. For the most part they were about our own experiences. We gave each other the strength and the environment to do that.

Anderlini - Do you think that a similar situation would be possible today?

Shange - It would be impossible today. Those of us who are my age group--in their late thirties--are much more sophisticated than we used to be. We are also involved with families and relationships of some sort, and we are not as available to one another as we used to be. We all used to be single and free. Free to do whatever, and that's no longer true. It is also no longer true that there haven't been great frictions in the feminist movement, between gay women and straight women, for instance. But when I was working there was no such thing. That didn't exist. The literature itself didn't exist: now we have virtually twenty years of it; so the kind of excitement and exuberance and commitment that you could get in 1971 is not necessary right now.

Anderlini - Would you like to talk about the mainstream American public? How would you characterize it?

Shange - I am one of these people who have never condescended to an audience, and I have never not had one. I was trained by black poets before

I was twenty-one, I was lucky enough to have that. And I know the significance of a national art and popular art. I have never intended to do anything but that, because it wasn't important to me to do anything but that.

Anderlini - You moved out of New York when *colored girls* became a big commercial success. Did that have to do with some kind of brutality that success in this country entails?

Shange - That's one of the reasons I left. I had to keep doing things I didn't want to do. The people would stop me in a goddamned laundromat to ask me for an autograph. All this had to stop.

When I used to go to writers' workshops we all went there as a jury of peers. Nobody paying any money. Nobody was the teacher. There was no degree. There was criticism, but that was all voluntary and free. I am interested in honest writing and writing that's felt. I worry that an institutional context is an antithesis to a writer's reality.

#### As a Performance Artist

Anderlini - Can you describe the difference between theatre and performance art?

Shange - I can change performance art when I want to. Before performance theatre we had the same thing every night. The same lines. I don't like that. [*Colored Girls* was never the same at any reading that I did in California. My character moved every night, and she had more and more things around her. By the last two weeks I was really feeling very accomplished: I knew I had hit some new things.

Doing the same thing every night, that's not an adventure for me. I'd find out how I use my fingers, I'd find out how I held my cigarette. I discovered things.

Anderlini - Is *ridin the moon in texas*, a performance piece?

Shange - Yes. There is no set, it is not a drama: it's performance art. It defies some theatrical conventions in the sense that we have gone beyond that little story. It is not very long. I don't like to do any more work on it: I like it as it is. If I had to do it as a theatre piece, I'd have to think about relationships with so and so: do this and do that. You've got two women there that are related conceptually and emotionally to the first piece. The first piece is also the refrain of the last piece. So it's all tied together. But it's much more like music to me. It's much more like doing a concerto with four flutes, than it is like theatre. And also I can change it.

Take that out, put this in. And my actors have more freedom, their blocking is not going to determine the success or failure. Performance art is to pull pieces, and put pieces in at will. Which you cannot do in a theatre. And I need that. I need to get back to my own art form.

We are not using a conventional theatre. I know the setting that we are going to use, and I designed the piece for it. We will tape it and we will repeat it, but we will not distribute the tape as a finished product. And I could still decide to change the last piece.

A play has a form that has to be finished. A performance piece has an organic form, but it can even flow. And there doesn't have to be some ultimate climax in it. And there does not have to be a denouement.

And I am much more interested in this because as a writer I can do more with it. Writing plays is very confining.

As a Woman Writer

Anderlini - Do you think that there is a women's culture?

Shange - Yes.

Anderlini - What is it?

Shange - I don't know, it's ours.

Anderlini - Let's put it this way, do you think that gender is cultural?

Shange - Yes gender is cultural: we have menarche to deal with, virginity, menopause, pregnancy, childbirth; these things are unavoidable. And in some places they've been wise enough to have ritual and ceremony about significant events. It is unfortunate in our culture--meaning north American mainstream culture--that all this has been minimized to the point where little girls are even afraid to say that they are starting to menstruate when they should be very happy. Grown women are afraid to say that they are approaching the menopause, when that means that they have lived a whole successful life. They've lived so long that they can have this.

A whole thrust of feminist mothers and daughters are beginning to change that. We are having menstruation parties for our daughters, and menopause parties for our friends. Another element of our culture is how we take care of those around us. It's a nurturing element that has to do with menstruation, menopause, pregnancy and childbirth. We like to make things for people, we make quilts, dinner, rugs, curtains, bedspreads, plants, altars, things to fill our environment.

A psychologist from Columbia Presbyterian Hospital did a study of bag people, vagabonds, and they discovered that the men would come to one of those refuge houses with nothing. They'd come in there with their clothes in their bags, they eat the soup, they say the prayers, they go to bed. The women come with pictures, altars, crosses, jewelry, little totems of things that they put around. The same little weird thing, and they put it back in their trash-bag and take it to the next place they're going.

Anderlini - How was a woman of color defined when you were becoming a woman, and how do you think that has changed, and how do you think you have contributed to that change?

Shange - All I had to do is go to school, keep my virginity and marry a doctor. That was it. Because there have been so many years of writing by women of color, I can give my daughter a book by a black woman writer, by a native American woman or by an Asian American woman that she can read. When we started writing this wasn't there, and so there was an urgency. Right now there is an urgency to things, but not in the literature itself.

Anderlini - What is the urgency?

Shange - The urgency now is to deal with more subtle issues, more complex and hidden conflicts between men and women. We can look at how we abuse ourselves, or how we abuse our daughters, or how we neglect men who are trying to help us, or how we abuse them. I think it's more introspective, and more cosmopolitan.

Anderlini - But do you think that before the new feminist movement there had been better times for women?

Shange - If they were rich and French and white. If you could be Georgia O'Keeffe, and marry Stieglitz, and then he'd let you go off in New Mexico and paint. On the other hand, there is always Frieda Kahlo, but she didn't do so well, and we had to wait till she would die to figure out that she could paint.

Anderlini - There were many women in the art scene in the twenties, especially here, in this country.

Shange - This country was not good for women. Women did something that made this country better. The country did not write the plays, the country did not sign their name at the end of it, the country did not sit up at night revising things. These women did.

Anderlini - There was an opportunity for them to do so.



Shange - People 'take' their space. They do things, but nobody 'gives' an opportunity. I just don't believe that. You do things.

Anderlini - In Europe women were in patriarchal companies where the writer was always a man.

Shange - But they also did things without signing their names at times: that's why we have *Anonymous was a Woman*. Because there are always things that were written by women . . . and women who signed their names as men. That doesn't mean they didn't do it. It just meant that they didn't sign their names as women. I don't believe that we haven't always struggled. I think that there are periods when there is more strength than at other times. As long as the incidence of rape increases every month, in the United States where these people live, why do I care if they have published twelve more female writers? What difference would that make to me? Women's lives are important, art is important, but what is more important? What women did appears in the text. But the credit is given, say, to Molière.

And that's not where the credit should go. In this country women signed because the producers could make money. It has nothing to do with us.

As a 'Gulf Coast' Artist

Anderlini - Do you feel that there is something called Texan culture?

Shange - Yes. We call it the Gulf Coast Art, and it's Hispanic, Creole, Cajun, oil field trash, the newcomers from New York, everybody. Our response to our own land. And one thing about Texas that I like is that they don't talk about the United States here. My daughter asked me was the United States in Texas, that made me feel good. Something more important than this miasma called the United States. I can take you for miles, and you will never see a white person. Texas was covered with trees because the slaves like to have all those trees. All these little towns out here were all plantations. We are around here, we didn't have any place to go.

As Gulf Coast artists, *sabemos que nosotros esperamos de victorias con cultura y armas* (we know that we expect to win by culture and arms), we fight on a dual front, with culture and weapons. Writing is cultural aggression, but it isn't robbing someone. It is getting back something that was ours, our lives, our brains, our dignity. I wrote a performance piece, *Sanctuary*; in Spanish it is called *Donde esta la casa de Dios*. It is bilingual because it is about Anglos and Salvadorans in the Sanctuary movement in southern Texas. A couple of Anglos decide to take in Salvadorans without papers. A Protestant family. There is that sentence in the Scripture that says 'where two or three of you gather, I shall be with thee.' These people are going to say it to the Sheriff

and the national Militia that is trying to get the Salvadorans out. They'll say that 'you can't come in here because there are two or three of us gathered.' In south Texas this is a problem: we have people going to jail all the time. They take refugees that our government doesn't recognize as refugees.

As a Third World Writer

Anderlini - You said at one time that you are a third world writer. What do you mean by that?

Shange - At a major conference in the Philippines in 1945 Du Bois and some intellectual and political leaders of colonized countries met and they pronounced us the third world. Since world war two was the war for democracy, why were Moroccans fighting for France?

Why were Puerto Ricans, Navahos, Blacks, Filipinos fighting for America? We couldn't vote, we couldn't own land. Fidel Castro, Amilcar Cabran, Ho Chi Minh, Lumumba, Nasser, were all products of that political phenomenon. We said--our races said--'this is it, and from now on either get out or we'll fight you till you do.' That conference has promulgated more revolutions and more changes of attitude toward people of color in the world than anything else I can think of. In 1904 W.E.B. Du Bois wrote that the issue of the twentieth century is the issue of color, and he was right. I happen to be of color, and I have taken my stand on that basis. Hopefully my writing affects that.

Afro-Americans from North America have been so Anglicized that they have been isolated from the entire hemisphere, and that to me is atrocity. My work is now approaching the point where I can't even write in one language. I really truly believe that subliminally language, whether you understand it or not, hits certain nerves, as if somebody touches you, and you feel better, or you feel pain.

I do bilingual or trilingual work, I am trying to get to that point where the force of the language itself will move you. Not the dictionary explanation of what this word means, but simply the force of the language itself. If in fact, as the Bible says, in the beginning there was the word, that means that as a writer I can be anywhere. There is power in simple sound, language is no more than sounds that we give meaning to. We don't have to have a literal translation: if we do then there is something wrong. In poetry and opera I think that it is so.

Anderlini - Don't you suffer when you write?

Shange - I wrote a piece for an actor who died of AIDS, and for a sculptor who was murdered by her husband. That wasn't easy to do: it is not even easy

to talk about it. But it is all I could give them: they can live in literature, somebody might not forget them.

Imagination allows us to feel and express those things that might destroy us in any other form. If we couldn't write, if we couldn't sculpt, if we couldn't play music, we might kill somebody. I'd rather weep over a piece of paper and have to retrace over the letters, than have gone out and killed somebody.

In the European sense I think I am a romantic poet: I don't think I know where my lines come from, I don't claim all the rights to them, and I do feel myself as a medium sometimes--beyond me. I think that the unconscious--which sometimes expresses itself through artists--is a medium of other spirits--of other deities: to let us have things that we can't have rationally.

People who read are dealing with themselves: our responsibility is to write something that somebody can take and have it in their life. As long as any reader remembers a character, or a line from something that I wrote then I did enough of that, that's my job.

There are three political movements to which I am really committed and act within. That's the activity against South Africa, active support for Nicaragua, and active support for Swapo in Namibia. But I am not conversant in those cultures. I know what I am talking about when I talk about white Protestants in south Texas and Salvadorans. I know the decisions and the legal system involved here; I know how to verbalize or articulate the desires of the refugees: they lived with me so I know this. When I say that I am 'a child of the new world' this is what I mean. I could travel from Houston to Panama City or Santiago, and wherever I meet people of color, there is never any discrepancy of thought.

There is no reason to be afraid of one another. The Sanctuary piece gave me an opportunity to say that. I was the first Afro-American Anglo to be included in a Latin American Theatre Festival. In 1979 at the Public Theatre in New York. My work is not about Anglos, it's about the western hemisphere. The Europeans came here to conquer paradise, the Africans were dragged here to work, the native Americans had paradise. We are all here now, let's do something with it. Let's make this something.

Anderlini - But you write in English, the language that has been inherited from the colonizer. How do you feel about that?

Shange - 'We must kill the King's English,' that's Judy Grahn's line. And forge the new language of the hemisphere. The name of America has been imposed and appropriated. Limited to white English speaking Americans. Who the hell do they think lives here? California is two-thirds third world, and so is Texas and New York.

Anderlini - How is your work received in other American countries?

Shange - I have been published in Nicaragua. I gave all my publishing rights for Latin America to the Sandinista government. I have been produced in Portuguese in Sao Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, with Brazilian actresses, who would call themselves people of color.

Anderlini - Do you think that there is a reverse racism? Perhaps that complicity you were describing . . .

Shange - My job is to take care of my people. If seventeen blacks from the gang called the Mummies in Los Angeles irrupted in here doing this little step they do when they go out together, the separation would immediately happen: I would be them. And I would be them with no shame.

Anderlini - Does this complicity also happen with women?

Shange - Yes, I think so. For me it does.

*Nashville, Tennessee*

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