



**StarTribune Penumbra staging landmark 'colored girls'.
(VARIETY)**

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1/3 Writer and performer Ntozake Shange did not invent the idea of using choreographed movement to accompany spoken words, or using spoken words as percussive, scat-like music. Other artists - from poets and playwrights to dancers and singers - had fused these different elements together before.

But when Shange's choreopoem, "for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf," landed on Broadway in 1976, it blended dance, theater and music in a fresh way that honored all three forms in their own right.

The show, which opens Thursday night at Penumbra Theatre in St. Paul, celebrates the lives of seven women through a series of jazzy poems. It's a loosely structured, free-associative tour of their lives. The poems do not cohere as one traditional narrative, but as individual, expressive clusters. Although "colored girls" is spoken, it often more closely resembles a jazz song - with texture, rhythm and improvisation - than a standard drama in a theatrical setting.

The success of "colored girls" gave many writer/performers permission to do their own cross-disciplinary work. And because it's one of only a few works written by a black woman to reach Broadway, the show also made it legitimate to raise issues that had been considered out of bounds, such as gender-based bias and female empowerment. The women in the show are not wallow-in-suffering victims. They are stepping into their own power.

"It inspired a whole generation to explore language in ways that led to so much of the exciting work that we're seeing today," said Philip Bither, curator of performing arts at Walker Art Center in Minneapolis. "The poetry of the piece, plus early hip-hop, did help spark the spoken word movement that has flowered so wonderfully."

Crystallizations

Shange's work was different from many mainstream artists who came before and after her, not simply because of the issues the piece raised - in a way that infuriated many at the time - but also because of its techniques.

For instance, while storyteller Spalding Gray delivers his monologues with an ironic detachment, Shange never gives any appearance of neutrality. And while there are contemporary music theater works that play with language and syllables, using language as a percussive device, none achieved the synthesis of language and music in "colored girls."

Because of its content, sass and style, Shange's choreopoem helped create whole new fields in the arts, from free associative word stylings to jazzy rapping. It also helped establish different demands on audiences. "Colored girls" expected audiences to hear and see things more rapidly than in a standard play, an expectation of many of today's fleet-tongued rap and pop musicians.

"We are used to living on the beat, but this asks us exist in between beats, to hear multiplicity of tones - rhythm, drum, time - but also multiplicity of color and light," said director, writer and performer Laurie Carlos, who originated the role of Lady in Blue in the Broadway version of "colored girls." Carlos also helps choose scripts at Penumbra.

Carlos said that "colored girls" helped unleash new energy in the theater through its emphasis on female issues, as well as its dynamic style of delivery.

"This piece asks us to exist in a swirl, in a theater world with everything exploding onstage and where there are no limits," she said.

Anxieties and influence

In the 1980s and '90s, many choreographers took on language as an essential part of their work - from Danial Shapiro and Joanie Smith in the Twin Cities to national and emerging acts such as the Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Company and Grisha Coleman's

Hotmouth.

Some performers credit Shange's piece with launching their careers.

"Working on 'colored girls' feels very much like a homecoming for me," said Twin Cities writer/performer Djola Branner, who is choreographing the show. "When I saw it twice some years ago in San Francisco, it was the first time that I saw women onstage whom I might know. It was the first time that I felt that I could be involved in theater."

Branner continued: "As I look at the work that I've written in the last 20 years, I could see how Ntozake Shange has influenced me in many ways. She gave me permission to create work that is not just about text or movement or music."

Ironically, because "colored girls" has become a standard, it could become a roadblock, some theater artists contend. Many theaters across the country stage the show, pointing to it as an example of diversity and innovation, even though it's 23 years old.

"What frightens me is that this piece would be the place where people would stop, instead of begin," said Carlos.

New rituals

At Penumbra, "colored girls" will be staged by director Kym Moore, a professor at the University of Massachusetts who has become known for untraditional stagings, such as a version of "Romeo and Juliet" where the competing families are of different classes.

Moore said she does not want to redo a classic. She has cast seven women in unexpected roles. An Asian actress, for example, plays the role that would normally be played by a Latina.

"I want to frame it as a ritual that women go through - we get together and talk and vent. But it's more than that," said Moore. "I want to reach the poetry and the elevation and the mythological level. I want us to see ourselves in a new way, where male and female energies are different but respected, where we can live in a lofty but earthy place. This piece gives us permission to do that."

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