NTOZAKE SHANGE'S HOLISTIC VISION OF ART

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Abstract: Ntozake Shange's Holistic Vision of Art deals with an African American writer of entirely different nature – a surprising combination between a professional dancer, a poet and a playwright, and a novelist – to which two other qualities should be added, those of a mother and a black woman. Ntozake Shange explores life's "nappy edges," the metaphoric terrain just beyond neatly fixed social definitions. There, the sweat of pursuing an intimate, humane connection with the world as well as with one's innermost selves is manifested as a dynamic, affirmative rawness. Hers is a holistic vision within which language, music, movement, icon, and time and space are manipulated so that poetry becomes drama and dance; the political is simultaneously the aesthetic and the personal; and spirituality offers insights which ultimately empower one to grapple with a problematic social world.

Keywords: art, spirituality, nationalism, conservatism,non-comformism

With the 1976 production of *for colored girls who have considered suicide/ when the rainbow is enuf,* Ntozake Shange exploded upon the American national consciousness, claiming for black women a beauty and artistic validity previously denied them. Though her subsequent theater texts have failed to garner the controversial public attention accorded to the first play, Shange has nonetheless remained a significant voice in American theater. Among the hallmarks of her distinctive style are a disregard for conventional, linear, dramatic structure; a crafting of arresting, poetic imagery; shrewd manipulation of nonrational modes of insight; and daring commitment to what are perceived as personal and public truths. In the context of American theater, Shange's dramaturgy is most closely related to that of Adrienne Kennedy and Amiri Baraka; within a larger Western tradition, her most immediate references are the French playwright Antonin Artaud and the German Bertolt Brecht. Though these four writers may appear quite different, particularly in relation to their interest in sociopolitical issues, they are similar in their pursuit of dramatic forms that do not reside wholly within a Euro-American framework. For Artaud and Brecht, inspiration was to be found in the nonillusionist theaters of Asia; for Kennedy, Baraka, and Shange herself, the creative source is African culture as lived in the diaspora.

Born Paulette Williams on October 1948 to surgeon Paul T. Williams and psychiatric social worker Eloise Owens Williams, Shange was raised initially in Trenton, New Jersey. The oldest of four children, she seems to have enjoyed a childhood blessed with material security and loving parents who traveled widely, maintained an international set of friends, and transmitted a pride in African and African American cultures. They exposed the precocious girl to a variety of influences ranging from musicians Dizzy Gillespie and Chuck Berry to writers like Paul Laurence Dunbar, Countee Cullen, and T. S. Eliot. Sunday-afternoon family variety shows might consist of her mother offering selections from Shakespeare, her father performing magic tricks or improvising on the congas, and the children doing a soft-shoe or playing such instruments as the violin, cello, flute, and saxophone. As she was later to reveal in a self-interview entitled "i talk to myself," included in her 1978 poetry collection *Nappy Edges*, family members voraciously pursued whichever arts struck their fancy, so that "any exploration of personal visions waz the focus of my world."

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When Shange was eight, the family moved to St. Louis, Missouri, where they lived for five years. There she was among the first black children to integrate the public school system. As later fictionalized in the novel *Betsey Brown* (1985), that experience seemingly left a sense of anger and betrayal at being thrust out of the security of the black community into the known violence of the white world. But apparently it also strengthened Shange's fighting spirit and pride in her own abilities, for in the poem "nappy edges (a cross country sojourn)" she answers actual and would-be oppressors:

my dreams run to meet aunt marie
my dreams draw blood from ol sores
these stains & scars are mine
this is my space
i am not movin (*Nappy Edges*, p. 88)

Though her parents took a keen interest in events throughout the African diaspora, that progressive perspective was nonetheless counterbalanced by a black, middle-class conservatism. As a means of advancing in America, its adherents preached individual initiative and a noblesse oblige understood through W. E. B. Du Bois's "talented tenth" model of relating to the impoverished masses; repression of sexual impulses and other potentially nonconformist instincts; and disavowal of unrefined aspects of African American culture, as often defined by the white mainstream. As Shange admitted in a 1976 *Village Voice* interview with Michelle Wallace, the vacuousness of that class perspective initially led her to rebel by adopting the idioms of the live-in maids who had cared for her as a child. Indeed, only some nine years later with the lush rite-of-passage novel *Betsey Brown* would she be able to represent aspects of her middle-class background.

When Paulette Williams was thirteen, the family moved back to New Jersey, settling this time in Lawrenceville. She had written short stories in elementary school but had been deterred by racial insults. Similarly, at Morristown High School she wrote poetry, some of which was published in the school magazine, but derogatory comments concerning her choice of black subject matter caused her to again abandon this mode of self-expression. During these years she became progressively more frustrated that young black girls had virtually no appropriate models of success. As she confided in the Wallace interview, "There was nothing to aspire to, no one to honor. Sojourner Truth wasn't a big enough role model for me. I couldn't go around abolishing slavery."

After earning a master's degree in 1973, Shange moved north to the San Francisco Bay Area, where she taught humanities and women's studies courses. San Francisco, which had nurtured an earlier generation of Beat poets, at that time offered a fertile environment in which the talents of Third World and white women artists could particularly flourish. At this time Shange was reciting poetry with the Third World Collective and was also dancing with Raymond Sawyer and Ed Mock, whose class routines and formal choreography linked specific folk traditions of West Africa and the Caribbean to the vaudeville and street dance traditions of Afro-America. By discovering in movement some of the intricacies and strengths of her identity as a black woman, Shange found that she was also discovering her voice as a poet. Thus, as she was to write in describing the creative context of her San Francisco years, "The freedom to move in space, to demand of my own sweat a perfection that could continually be approached, though never known, waz poem to me, my body & mind ellipsing, probably for the first time in my life."

The theme of the body and dance as sites of a knowledge whose rhythms constitute poetry is one to which Shange would return again and again. Its importance is related to her likely exposure at this time to such New World African religions as Vodun, found in Haiti, and Santéria, practiced in Cuba. The production of *for colored girls . . .* was like nothing America had previously experienced. Jettisoning the national preference for linearly

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structured, realistic plays, the text manipulated poetry and dance so as to create a swirl of imagery, emotions, colors, and movement proclaiming a woman's experience a fit subject for dramatic representation. For many women and men, the performance became akin to a consciousness-raising event. At the outset, seven women, distinguishable from each other primarily by the color of their simple dresses, set forth in the image of a black girl "[who's] been dead so long / closed in silence so long / she doesn't know the sound / of her own voice / her infinite beauty. They announce that what is to follow is a gift or a song calculated to restore her to life. The subsequent collage of danced poems – or "choreopoem," as Shange labeled the text – traces a black girl's eager transition from adolescence (high school graduation and loss of virginity) into an adulthood of stormy relationships with men and eventual self-recognition of a personhood whose legitimacy is divinely natural. Yet, because the women play multiple unnamed characters, what emerges is not an individual protagonist but an essential Everywoman.

Moments of transcendence intersect with what Shange was later to call a labored breathing necessitated by the attempt to withstand racist and sexist social definitions. To the exuberant 1960 sounds of the Motown rhythm-and-blues songs about love, the women initially do the pony, the swim, and other popular dance steps. Sliding effortlessly into the Afro-Latin beat of Willie Colon, they also execute the merengue and the bomba, all in celebration of the wondrous vitality of their bodies and graduation from "mama to what ever waz out there." But a sudden lighting change pierces their joy, plunging them into a misogynist, material realm.

One early poem is particularly remarkable, for it conjoins definitions of woman and of theater treated separately throughout much of the play. Most simply expressed, "sechita" concerns a down-on-her-luck tent dancer who performs for the country yokels in Natchez, Tennessee, while dreaming of the bygone, elegant quadroon balls in St. Louis, Missouri. The splendor of a Creole society insulated from the hostility of poor whites is fleetingly suggested as a counterpoint to the dancer's tawdry, patchwork circumstances in which female sexuality, constructed so as to titillate male desire, is the currency for ensuring economic survival. Accustomed to gin-stained, itchy black stockings and a mirror which "made her forehead tilt backwards/ her cheeks appear sunken/," Sechita cannot dispel the feeling that here in Natchez humiliation is not merely societal but natural, for "god seemed to be wiping his feet in her face/. Thus, dissociating her soul from her person, she dances to reassert her primal connections, seemingly ever more vigorously the more the drunken men aim gold coins between her thighs.

Because Sechita is not simply an object of male fantasy, the actress must do more than narrate a story of degradation. She must also exhort a powerful subject or agent to make her presence known. For that reason, the actress utters the character's praise names: " the full moon/ sechita/ goddess/ of love/ egypt/ the 2nd millennium." Through sound, rhythm, and repetition, through what the Yorubas of West Africa term $\alpha\backslash\mathfrak{I}$, or the power to make things happen (which resides in language), she strives to call into being that primordial spirit who presides over the perpetuation of life. Similarly, the performer who dances Sechita's narrative both retraces the ancestral history of female agony and partakes of divine potency. Her experience potentially approximates that of a Vodun devotee who, in dancing and opening her body to trance, serves as a medium of the gods and thereby reconnects herself and the community to all history, past, present, and yet unlived. Through the dynamic of conjuring, as manipulated by speaker, dancer, and musician, Sechita is presented victorious, kicking past the coins thrown onto the makeshift stage to commune with the stars. The poem has thus operated within an African conception of theatre, being simultaneously representational and presentational, functioning both to construct a fictive event as though it were real and to

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constitute a moment of transcendence when, dependent on the performers' skills and the audience's beliefs, the human and the divine merge in the body of the dancer.

The initial production and subsequent national tour of *for colored girls...* garnered praise throughout the media, vaulting Ntozake Shange overnight into a celebrity status from which, as she would later acknowledge, it would take years to recover a sense of privacy and focus. It provoked an avalanche of responses that seemingly became a barometer of audience members' identification with larger, feminist issues. As suggested earlier, for many women and men the text was refreshingly honest in naming some of the tensions experienced in heterosexual relationships. Feminism, heretofore represented primarily as the preserve of middle-class white women, was seen to have tangible relevance to the lives of black women and women of color.

But for some in the black community in particular, the text constituted a virulent attack that left untouched the real power source, namely, white men. No positive male-female interactions were presented, and the "beau willie" poem, coming at the end of a long catalog of male insensitivities, functioned so as to accuse all black men of pathological behavior. For that reason, argued proponents of this view, white male critics, whose positions with New York newspapers gave them national influence, could celebrate a newly discovered humanity with black women; they could publicly rejoice in feeling not the least bit threatened, as they presumably had been by the earlier Black Arts plays of Amiri Baraka and others.

In this black community debate, two somewhat separable issues were conflated, namely the audience's interpretation or production of meaning and the media's hegemonic function in shaping individual responses to reinforce values espoused by the dominant power structure. While there is a certain validity to the textual objections concerning Shange's portrayal of black men, the animus behind some of the negative responses seems more related to the latter issue of the media's function. That is, *for colored girls. . .* violated the unspoken code of the 1960s by rejecting the equation of black liberation with male privilege. In bringing certain "family" or intra-racial problems out of the proverbial closet, the text appeared to validate existing negative stereotypes used to rationalize the oppression of black men. Moreover, it did so in an arena that has historically denied black men and women significant opportunities for projecting their own counter-narratives.

But ironically, were it not for a mass media controlled by white men, the text never would have involved large numbers of black people in a much-needed reexamination of male-female relationships. There is yet another irony about which virtually no critic has commented. That is, most of the representations of Shange and the actresses in photographs, posters, or interviews projected images of anger or extreme distress. Underneath all the notoriety and praise was a subtext of aberrant behavior, an insinuation that the play's feminist message could be attributed to suicidal impulses. From either standpoint, white patriarchy was clearly the beneficiary. But as the foregoing discussion has demonstrated, it is nonetheless possible to produce readings that resist these hegemonic designs and refigure the black woman as a self-empowered subject.

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