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## Colored Girls, no. 2

By Catherine Clemens

Feminist writer Ntozake Shange, creator of *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide-When the Rainbow is Enuf*, has become another talented and welcome member of what seems to be a growing movement in theatre. This movement has been long in the making, but soon will look at writers like Shange as the grassroots of a modern feminist theatre.

With women's struggle to seek a coherent identity, and to break out of the bondage of outgrown stereotypes, we begin to see a change reflected in society. We should also expect to see a lot more women writing for the theatre. Certainly, up to this time, there have been pitifully few. Shange expresses the need and urgency for this kind of self-expression in one of the poems from *Colored Girls*:

*Somebody  
Anybody  
Sing a black girl's song  
Bring her out  
to know herself  
to know you... she's been dead  
so long*

*Colored Girls* recently opened at the Royal Alexandra Theatre in Toronto after long runs in many theatres on and off Broadway. The show has been received coolly by the patrons of Toronto's most prestigious theatre because it differs drastically from the traditional bill of fare. *Colored Girls* is certainly not an evening of light entertainment — it is one black woman's expression of her inner feelings and life, and the lives she sees around her. Shange blends these images into her poems and sets them to dance; she feels that it is in dance that the contemporary black woman expresses herself. Indeed, the show opens with a musical rendition of *Dancin' in the Streets*. Skirts of yellow, red, green, purple, blue, orange, and brown, spin like tops to create a kaleidoscope effect. Everyone is lost in the energy and movement of the dance — at last, the Lady in Orange starts to speak, her voice overcomes the dancers, who sit in a circle and listen. The Lady in Orange recreates the high school prom where she was the star, being the only virgin. The other ladies look on sadly and comment...

*dark phases of womanhood  
of never havin' been a girl  
half-notes scattered*

*without rhythm no tune...*

*it's funny  
it's hysterical  
the melody-lessness of her dance  
don't tell nobody don't tell a soul  
she's dancin' on beer cans and  
shingles*

Like applying splashes of colour to an empty piece of canvas, Shange adds depth and texture with her poetry until a more complete picture of a black woman emerges. We see dimension, complex emotion, a past, and a present. We share her beauty and pain as her problems focus clearly on defining herself according to the love she receives from a man. Shange presents the simple answer to her dilemma in a desperate story of a woman who has both her children dropped from the fifth story of a tenement house by an irate lover. Groping on the floor, the woman explains what pulled her through her crisis:

*i was missin somethin  
a layin on of hands  
the holiness of myself releases....  
i found god in myself and i loved  
her  
i loved her fiercely*

And so, Shange suggests to the black woman a religious conversion to self-love. There is also a suggestion for sisterhood among black women, for in unity there is strength... and something more, companionship. Some critics have misinterpreted this piece as advocating lesbianism, while last week's critic for the *Excalibur* thought the piece contained no message at all!

Clearly Shange is striking hard at what she feels is a social snobbery that exists among black women, (and might I extend this to white women as well). As women steadily begin to climb up the socio-economic ladder, the steps they have taken become purposely fogged. A feeling of, "Yes, I was poor, but at least I wasn't as badly off as her" prevails, so that those who are capable of giving emotional support and help to their "sisters" are unwilling to recognize them as "sisters".

Shange herself was born into the upper middle class black society, so that this elitist attitude was fed to her along with her pabulum. Her father is a doctor who came from a well-to-do family.

Shange's life changed dramatically somewhere along the path to a Ph.D at Barnard, "...I became terribly afraid that I would be isolating myself from all the other blacks in the country, either educationally or economically and would be left essentially with nobody to play with".

It was at this point in her life that she became a passionate feminist. One night, at a poetry reading, a young man asked her why she always wrote about women — "... it irked me that someone would think that women were not an adequate subject. I really got much more involved with writing about women for that reason. I was determined that we were going to be viable and legitimate literary figures."

The "literary" figures are part of the New Naturalism movement, popularized by such writers as David Mamet who uses modern language (or lack of it) to create desired effect. Shange finds poetry in the language of the live-in housekeepers who looked after her as a child and in high school girls deciding whether they should give up their virginity in the "deep black Buick smelling of Thunderbird and ladies in heat."

Although these characters are far from liberated or sophisticated, there is much that the modern woman can identify with. Ms. Shange is starting at the simplest level, exploring the essential aspects of all womankind. And it is precisely at this ground level that women must begin to explore themselves in theatre. As more women take a creative role in the arts (rather than the usual interpretive one), it becomes evident that it is not talent, intelligence or desire that women are lacking; merely the wisdom and confidence that comes with experience.



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