

ARTS / CULTURE

Stories of the Nova Scotian experience

African Nova Scotian story-tellers enchanting

BY DAISY KIDSTON

Sitting in the back of a small room full of the sounds of murmuring conversation, the squeaking of folding chairs, and the smells of coffee, I watched the room slowly swell from medium capacity to packed. My friend arrived just in time before the room hushed into silence and a young girl took the stage. The room was not only swelling with people now, but with expectancy.

Last Feb. 10 the Spring Garden Library held "Talk the Talk: A Night of African Nova Scotian Story-Telling". The event, one of the many staged in honour of African Heritage Month, featured four story-tellers: Alfreda Smith, Tanya Hudson, Dr. Ruth Johnson, and David Woods. It was a night where history and story-telling shook hands, giving the audience a glimpse into these four performers' real lives and imaginations.

To begin the night, a young actress named Tanya Hudson appeared suddenly on stage and began to share idle gossip and jokes about people from her community. The casual, familiar way she related her community gossip made me feel like I was sitting in her kitchen or chatting to her at the corner store. The performance was very short though — I think it was a creative way to secure the audience's attention before the main course was set on the table.

The first story-teller was Dr. Ruth Johnson, a revered and honoured guest that evening. A renowned community activist and church leader, Dr. Johnson came to tell stories of her childhood in Africville, where she was born. She is a descendent of the Brown family,

one of the first settlers in that community.

An elderly woman splendidly dressed in a traditional African outfit, Dr. Johnson obviously had a painful and slow time getting to the stage, and once there, she said she must sit down. Despite her quiet arrival to the stage, once Dr. Johnson opened her mouth there was nothing quiet and slow about her at all. I don't know how long she talked for, but the beautiful, often humorous tales she told us of her childhood in Africville were captivating. Adding to this was her warm personality. She was so entertaining that a murmur of disappointment rippled through the crowd when her tales ended.

Told that we were to hear her story "Motion", Tanya Hudson once again took the stage with a fabulous performance. Young and slender, wearing tights and pigtails, Hudson becomes a young, wild girl who is nicknamed Motion because she loves to dance, move and explore. Hudson brought youth and vigour to the stage with her performance. Though it was a funny, energetic tale about an untamed child, embedded within it was the power and eloquence of Motion's defiance of social norms. Alfreda Smith took the stage next. A story-teller and singer from North Preston, she was elegantly dressed in traditional African wear as was Dr. Johnson. Smith took us back to her childhood days in North Preston.

She seemed a little nervous though, and her tales did not flow with the same ease as the previous two performers'. When she told her tale about a cat getting thrown into the oven, the audience seemed uncomfortable — less amused than shocked. But alas, life isn't always

funny. The cat didn't die though, in case any of you were wondering as I was.

What I enjoyed the most of Smith's set was her singing. Though she only gave us a taste with two short gospel hymns, it was a memorable part of the evening, as it was unexpected as much as it was enjoyable.

Last to take the stage was David Woods, a prominent Nova Scotian actor and one of the organizers of the evening. Recently playing the Reverend in the play *Consecrated Ground*, Woods easily captured the audience's attention with his tall, striking presence and confident voice. Looking very artistic dressed all in black, Woods sat on a singular chair facing the audience.

"What do you want — funny or serious?" he asked the crowd, and we unanimously voted for funny in keeping with the light-hearted theme of the evening.

Woods proceeded to wrap us in a popular story of his called "Aunt Nellie", a tale about a feisty, God-fearing mother-in-law-from-Hell that goes, much to the chagrin of her son-in-law whom Woods is impersonating, to a predominantly white, conservative church and gives them a taste of her gospel

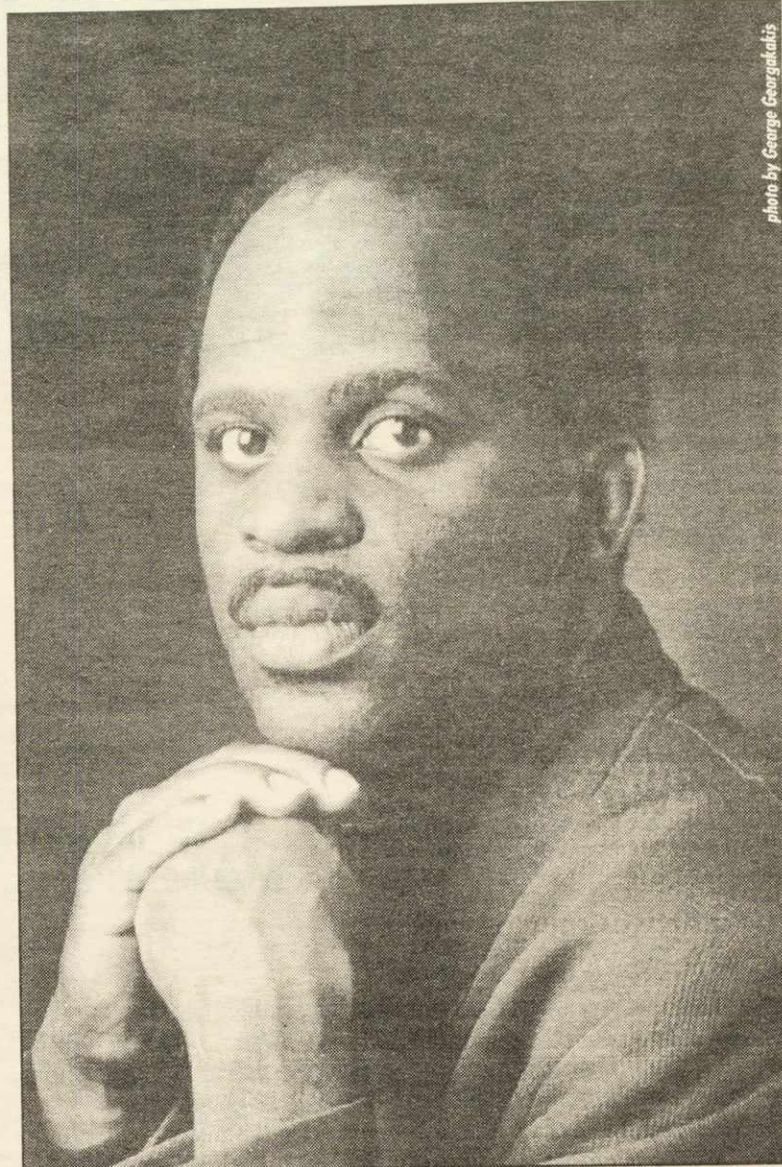


photo by George Georgakidis

Renowned Nova Scotian renaissance man David Woods.

soul.

Though this was an extremely funny story about a humorous woman, it also demonstrated the intersecting of two different races and two different religions which

fortunately, in this case, had an amusing result. With his excellent, hilarious performance, Woods gave us the perfect ending to a very enjoyable and celebratory evening of African culture.

Time for a divorce

The Member of the Wedding misses the mark

BY GREG MCFARLANE

Every once in a while I think about those who were outcasts in junior high school and I feel guilty. But if Neptune's latest production, *The Member of the Wedding*, teaches me anything, it is that I am a fool to lament the past.

The play centres around the character of Frankie (Dal theatre grad Patricia Zentilli), your typical 12-year-old loser. She's annoying, over-bearing, melodramatic, spiteful and longing for a different life where she can be accepted and happy. She's a pre-teen and confused. And we have to put up with it.

Frankie's brother, Jarvis (Charles Ross), has returned from service in World War II and is marrying Janice (Francene Deschepper). Frankie dreams of running away with them to a new life. For the whole performance the audience has to put up with Frankie's incessant whining about how she is neglected at home and how she is leaving with the newlyweds.

The Member of the Wedding is about the anguish Frankie feels

in her loneliness (the girls in the social club will not hang out with her), but the message of her loneliness is contingent on the audience finding an emotional connection with her. This doesn't happen. She is a pest, plain and simple, and when she breaks down in a puddle of tears on Berenice's lap in the climax of the play, it is in front of a largely unaffected crowd.

Zentilli is over-the-top in many scenes as Frankie, but, ironically, her shortcoming isn't in isolation. Weak portrayals and undeveloped, one-dimensional characters plague the whole production.

Take, for example, the subplot involving Honey Camden Brown (Kevin Hanshard), an angry young black man who feels strangled by pervasive racism in the post-WW2 American south. Honey is rarely given stage time, and when he is in front of the audience, it seems as though his primary role is to provide an historical and social setting for the play. Basically, he becomes a stereotype — an angry man that is given few redeeming qualities. When Honey dies, killed indirectly by the racist society he

despised, you care about *why* he's dead, but you don't really care that it's *him* — it could have been anybody, for the play failed to endear Honey to the audience.

Not that *The Member of the Wedding* is without its bright spots — Jackie Richardson is outstanding (as always) as Berenice Sadie Brown, the housemaid and mother-figure to Frankie, whose mother died while giving birth to her. And 12-year-old Lise Cormier does some gender-bending to play the role of John Henry West, Frankie's equally annoying but far more comical little cousin. In some scenes, where John Henry traipses around in women's clothing, Cormier is wonderful — saying nothing, and using the subtleties of facial expressions and movement to evoke genuine laughter from the audience.

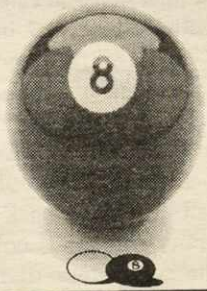
But the reason the play falters is because the audience fails to care about any of the characters, with the exception of Berenice. And with no one to give a damn about, the two-hour performance seems even longer — more stagnant and tiring than the hot, southern summer setting.

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