



image info

Ntozake Shange at Barnard College, 1978

Somebody Almost

Eileen M. Cunniffe

Watch this [video](#) about Ntozake Shange produced by the Barnard Center for Research on Women.

TWO YEARS BEFORE SHE DIED AT THE age of seventy, I had the privilege of seeing [Ntozake Shange](#) up close for the first time, listening as she read old and new poems to an auditorium packed with (mostly female) admirers at the African American Museum in Philadelphia. The occasion was the opening of an exhibition at the museum celebrating the fortieth anniversary of Shange's 1976 groundbreaking choreopoem, "*For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/When the Rainbow Is Enuf*."

Ms. Shange looked so frail it was hard to believe she was only ten years older than me; I learned later that she'd had a series of strokes about a decade earlier. But her voice was still strong, and her words, although I hadn't actively sought them out in many years, still had the power to yank me back to an earlier time—in my life, in the world, in my evolution as a reader, a writer, a woman.

Ms. Shange had no way of knowing that the

middle-aged white woman on the aisle seat of the fourth row had a cherished, yellowed paperback edition of *For Colored Girls* in her purse, heavily annotated in blue ink with asterisks and checkmarks, underscores and brackets. Or that nearly four decades earlier, when she was an occasional contributor to her college newspaper, the *Villanovan*, an editor had handed her two press tickets to see the still new play performed in the small studio space of Philadelphia's Walnut Street Theatre and asked her to write a review. This assignment had both flattered and terrified me. I loved theater, and even as an underclassman, I'd likely read (and maybe even seen) as many plays as anyone else on the paper's staff. It was a short train ride into the city, and I knew I could talk a friend into joining me for this cultural adventure. But writing a review? Criticizing someone's art? Who was I to judge another's writing? And then to hand in that judgment

and see it sent out into the world (okay, not the great wide world, just Villanova's campus) in black and white? Who was I?

I was an English major, for one thing, and while I was open to the experience of seeing an experimental theater piece, even before I got on that train I was a bit distracted by Shange's unconventional spellings, beginning with the odd-looking "enuf" in her title. *For Colored Girls* is unabashedly black and feminist, at times searing in its language and shocking in the realities it portrays. As the play began, it occurred to me that I was, perhaps, both too green (as a woman, as a feminist, as a writer) and too white (as a second-generation, Irish-Catholic, middle class, commuter from a suburban college sometimes referred to back in the 1970s as "Vanillanova") to even begin to understand what was happening on that stage, never mind being there in the guise of a theater critic.

And yet, in the way that art often does, almost from the moment those seven rainbow-clad ladies took their places and began to speak, they drew me into their dance, into their stories. Their language, their movements, their confidence, their vulnerabilities, their secrets, their sassiness—so unlike mine in oh-so-many ways, but surprisingly familiar in others. Who in that audience—or in any audience, anywhere—had not at some point experienced unrequited love? I couldn't help but see myself in the spotlight when the Lady in Red stepped forward and announced:

*without any assistance or guidance from you
i have loved you assiduously for 8 months
2 wks & a day
i have been stood up four times
i've left 7 packages on yr doorstep
forty poems 2 plants & 3 handmade
notecards i left
town so i cd send to you*

But it was the Lady in Green who spoke to

me most clearly that night. And it is the Lady in Green who has continued to speak to me—sometimes in a whisper, sometimes in a roar—down through the years. When she stepped forward and began her raw, funny, angry, self-affirming poem toward the end of the play, her words turned the key in a lock somewhere deep inside me.

somebody almost walked off wid alla my stuff

not my poems or a dance I gave up in the street

but somebody almost walked off wid alla my stuff

My twenty-year-old self recognized something in the words of this particular poem, a lesson I hadn't yet had to apply to my own life, at least not in any profound way. But on some level, I understood that lesson and filed it away. Only over time would I begin to collect experiences where my sense of self—and self-worth—as a woman would truly be tested. Sometimes, as in the poem, by a man, in a personal relationship. Other times by a job, especially in the years I spent as a ghost writer, when I often felt like the Lady in Green:

my stuff is the anonymous ripped off treasure of the year.

Occasionally by a bully in the workplace—not always a man—or a contractor looking to take advantage of me as a homeowner.

Over time, just the two words "somebody almost" began to buzz in my ear when I sensed that someone was perhaps trying to take more from me than I was willing to give; or take credit for something I had done; or gently (or not so gently) try to mold me into some version of a self who didn't feel authentic. This little alarm didn't always sound in time to save me from being hurt or from making a bad decision. But it has never failed me in those moments when

I've most needed to remember who I am or who I am still trying to become. And for that, I have always felt a debt of gratitude to Ms. Shange, and to her Lady in Green.

I didn't read the text of *For Colored Girls* until some time after I'd seen that performance and written my review. I know this because my paperback edition is dated 1980, which was a year or two after my brief turn as a theater critic. I no longer recall what I wrote in that review—I am sure it was positive, although I doubt it was terribly insightful. My old clips from the *Villanovan* were wrecked years ago when a pipe broke and the storage locker in my apartment complex was flooded. I do know that when I wrote that review I couldn't possibly have pretended (and still can't) to understand the world through the eyes of a woman of color. But I also know that seeing that play at that time in my life informed my understanding of myself and other women I knew then or have met since. It made me think differently about our choices, our challenges, our strengths, our triumphs.

That old paperback copy of *For Colored Girls* has traveled with me through the decades. Occasionally, I've pulled it from a bookshelf, flipped through it, retraced my own trail of marked-up lines from beginning to end. I'm knocked off balance every time I re-read these lines from the Lady in Green:

*i gotta have me in my pocket
to get round like a good woman shd
& make the poem in the pot or the chicken
in the dance
what I got to do
I gotta have my stuff to do it*

Tucked into the pages of my well-worn book is an April 1982 interview from the *Wilmington News Journal* with Shange, who had recently done a reading at the University of Delaware, just miles from my first apartment. The

headline describes her as "An artist in search of personal liberation, not fame." The article discusses her upper-middle-class origins in Trenton, where she was known as Paulette Williams before she re-named herself. It also discusses her feminism, which was not at all hindered by a general fondness for men, her struggles against racism and sexism, and the challenge of wanting her words simply to speak for themselves at a time when the success of *For Colored Girls* had the entertainment industry clamoring for more. That article also explains that the name Ms. Shange chose for herself comes from Zulu. Much later I learned the meaning behind her adopted name: Ntozake means "she who has her own things," and Shange means "she who walks with lions."

I reread *For Colored Girls* in its entirety before I saw Ntozake Shange in Philadelphia back in 2016 and again when I heard she had died—a loss that hit me harder than I might have expected. The news of her passing sent me searching for more information about her life and her writing in all those years between 2018 and that long-ago day when a college newspaper editor handed me two tickets to a play I'd never heard of. What I found through that search was one of those little gifts the universe sometimes offers up. In Ntozake Shange's official biography, listed among her academic credits, right there between Rice and DePaul, is Villanova University, where for a time she taught writing. It seemed funny I hadn't known this sooner because I retain a keen interest in the goings-on at my alma mater. But discovering when I did that Villanova had a place in Ms. Shange's story, too, felt like a kind of blessing. It felt like a nod from the frail but esteemed poet on that stage in 2016 to the woman seated in the fourth row, intentionally dressed in green. ♦♦