Ntozake Shange: Theatre of Revolt

This paper is a thesis based critical analysis of Ntozake Shange as a playwright and her revolutionary work throughout her career. It will attempt to prove her work as theatre of revolt by analyzing one of her plays and comparing it to other plays she has written. It will achieve this by providing, in detail, examples from her work, critiques, her inspirations and how it all relates to theatre of revolt. A thorough analysis of her world renowned and critically acclaimed choreopoem *For Colored Girls Who have Considered Suicide when the Rainbow was Enuf* will aid in proving her to be a revolutionary artist. This will be accomplished by evaluating her as an artist and playwright, examining her play, and how it ties into other areas of humanities during the time period she wrote for.

Born Paulette L. Williams, she decided to change her name to Ntozake Shange. The name itself is revolutionary and defiant in its original Zulu meaning. Ntozake means “she who comes with her own things” and Shange means “she who walks like a lion”. This name which she chose to give herself says a lot about her character. By giving herself an African name, Shange was able to identify herself as a strong, confident, and proud African American woman during a time when it was very difficult to exhibit pride of such characteristics, “Shange was bused to a formerly all-white school in St. Louis, where she was harassed and attacked by the other students. The Williamses were what was then called “race people”’ (NewYorker). This is
significant because her work usually consisted of pro feminist and Afro American writings.

Born into an affluent family, her father a surgeon and her mother a psychiatric social worker, she was surrounded by affluent and artistic influences. Her family had a strong love for the arts which is what partly encouraged her artistic inclinations. Because her family was well to do, Shange had the privilege of attending prestigious schools which included the University of Southern California were she received her master’s degree in American Studies. This ultimately led to her connecting with influential groups who helped shape her into the feminist writer she became.

While living in California and teaching humanities and women's studies courses at Mills College in Oakland, the University of California Extension, and Sonoma State College, Shange began to associate with poets, teachers, performers, and black and white feminist writers who nurtured her talents (Rutgers).

By associating with the likes of such people, Shange was able to expand on her true passions which is how she began the writing of For Colored Girls who Considered Suicide when the Rainbow was Enuf.

Shange proved herself to be a revolutionary writer with the creation of her first and most famous piece. For colored girls celebrates what it means to be a black woman while emphasizing their power to conquer the challenges they endure during times of pain and anguish. In her introduction, Shange describes her work as, “The words of a young black girl’s growing up, her triumphs & errors, our struggle to become all that is forbidden by our environment, all that is forfeited by our gender all that we have
forgotten”(Shange, p.xiv). This statement is an immense act of rebellion on Shange’s part. From this, it is evident that she refuses to be constrained by society to what it thinks a black woman should be or should not be. *For Colored Girls*’ deplorable depiction of the raw dilemmas that are imposed on African American women established Shange as an innovator in the advancement of African American theatre and drama. This is due not only to its rebellious content but also because she, “introduced a new performance style to mainstream culture, the choreopoem” (Pinkney, p.9). A celebrated artist and innovator, Shange also was the first to introduce verbal and non-verbal forms of communication in a, “format that Shange invented and defined as ‘a theatrical expression that combines poetry, prose, song, dance and music ... to arouse an emotional response in an audience (Lester, 1995)’(Shayal, p.4)’

In her choreopoem, Shange raises issues which were routinely faced by black women living in America during the 1970’s. Written during the women’s ERA movement, Shange demonstrates the twofold disadvantage placed upon black women, “it was all I had but bein alive & bein a woman & bein colored is a metaphysical dilemma/I haven’t conquered yet” (Shange, p.36). A book of poems about love and heartbreak, Shange relates to her own tragedy with love and the ability a man has to subdue a woman in love if she does not guard over her “stuff”. In a monologue by lady in green, there is an indication of a theft that occurs when a man breaks a woman’s heart,

Somebody almost run off wit alla my stuff/ & I waz standin there/lookin at myself/the whole time & it waznt a spirit took my stuff/waz a man whose ego
walked round like Rodan’s shadow...waz a lover/ I made too much room for/
almost run off wit alla my stuff...& I’m shoutin this is mine/& he don’t know he
got it...did you know somebody almost got away with me (Shange, p.40).
This deep and powerful message depicts a personal struggle she faced after
her divorce when she herself attempted suicide several times. In addition, it
is synonymous with the struggles of everyday black and non black women
alike.

Recognized as a renowned African American playwright, poet and
feminist, Shange acquired her inspiration through several factors including
the arts scene of the Bay area. In an interview with Will Power, Shange
declares, “the Bay Area was one of the few places in the country that was
truly and actively multicultural. When I wrote for colored girls, I meant it for
all women of color”. Truly the revolutionary, the original format of For
Colored Girls included one Puerto Rican with the possibility of an Asian. In
her interview with Power, she mentions that when she “took that idea to New
York, they took out all my Puerto Ricans, and when I wanted to include
Asians, they looked at me like I had lost my mind!” For colored girls, was
written and composed in the 70’s during a time when racism and gender
discrimination were frequent and ordinary. Clearly, Shange was ahead of her
time as were other artists of that time whose works were similar in protest.

Shange was one member among a line of elite feminist and African
American playwrights and poets emerging during the 1970’s. They had three
things in common that they were: black, women and feminists with a
common political message to uphold. With all the political turmoil, conflicts
between feminist and black nationalists were the norm. Artists such as Alison
Mills, author of *Francisco*, contributed to the rising cause of artistic rebellion through content and context of writings. Both Shange and Millis were icons and represented, “the role of artists in relation to the community—these authors created characters that articulated the political and cultural discord in which black women strove to define themselves as artists” (Mullen, p.1).

It was artists such as Mills and Shange who opened the door to other forms of African American art such as rap and hip hop. Shange and others alike were ahead of their time and revolutionized drama through the invention of African American theatre. There was no such thing before Shange, only American theatre. Throughout her career Shange was inventive and creative all while speaking her political messages through her works. She transformed the art of performance and is highly acclaimed among her peers. Her creation of *For Colored Girls* continues to amaze audiences worldwide and is the subject of study throughout universities on a global scale. Wrapping up this critical analysis one would have to conclude that Shange is a revolutionary artist whose writings such as *For Colored Girls* can be accurately labeled as Theatre of Revolt.
Works Cited


