

There's No One Like Ntozake Shange, Part 1: Wild Beauties

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In this multi-part series, Broadway Black interviews Poet **Ntozake Shange**.

The Legendary Blue Note Jazz Club located in NYC's Greenwich Village was buzzing in anticipation of Ntozake Shange's performance of *Wild Beauties*. Before the start of the show, I interview Shange's friends, family, and long time fans, asking them "what they were most looking forward to?"

Although hard to believe, it has been over 40 years since the creation of Shange's seminal work [for colored girls who have considered suicide / when the rainbow is enuf](#). Blue Note audience member's stories span decades; set in New York City, The Bay Area and every town or city in between.

They recall the moments they felt visible in her poetry. They blush as they confess they performed in local productions of *For colored girls* as lady in red, lady in green or other women in the play. They smile reciting lines from *sechita*, *pyramid* and "no more love poems #1. #2, #3 & #4." They are nostalgic as they tell me about seeing Shange's work on and off Broadway. They compare the play to the 1982 PBS American Playhouse production, to the Tyler Perry Film with strong opinions about each iteration. Each felt ownership and protective of Shange's work. Each came to see the artist whose work changed their lives.

At the end of their testimony, there is a pause. Their unending love for Shange is coupled with their concerns for her. I disclose I am writing about the performance and as a result, many ask me with caution in their eyes, about her health.

Is she healthy (enough to do this)? Is she too old to do this? Will this be her last performance?

These questions are caring and well meaning yet, problematic; heavily anchored in western cosmologies about health and our fears of a changing body. I graciously shift the conversation, encouraging them to relax and enjoy the show. As a journalist, I understand it is important to address these curiosities as it relates to Shange's most recent performance and the legacy of her work.



I had the pleasure to sit with Shange the morning of her Blue Note performance. She candidly discusses her health, her body and her excitement to be performing again since recovering from stroke related medical complications over the last decade. It's no secret that stroke rehabilitation has been an important part of recovery, as she shared the successes and setbacks on her journey towards wellness. "I went through a period where I didn't write. I didn't perform. I concentrated on my physical rehabilitation. I had to learn how to hold things, how to sit up how to stand."

She is thrilled with the progress she continues to make in rehab. Shange who is a gorgeous 68-year-old woman glows when she talks about dancing. She approaches her physical therapy as if it were a movement workshop often asking her cab drivers to play Latin music and dances in the back seat as she rides.

In our conversation, she strikes me as a fiercely independent woman. She is a Black artist who takes pride in the craft of her poetry. Shange reluctantly depends on speech recognition software to write poetry as the software seeks to not only auto correct but colonize the beauty of black phraseology that is the essence of her work.

Her writing uses a Black talk that dances like jazz telling stories of the diaspora. Her work is the embodiment of Blackness moving in the air to manifest emotion, uniquely her own and there is no one on earth who can replicate. Software certainly can't do what Shange can do and this is a source of her frustration.

Shange tells me Maya Angelou sent her children's books to read as she regained her speech. She tells me about times when walking, moving and certainly dancing was impossible. How getting a typewriter helped her feel more connected to her work. She still has poems to write and desires this connection to her words.

She shares that rehearsals are going well and how she loves working with musicians [William "Spaceman" Patterson](#), Michael Raye and [Patmore Lewis](#). She is ecstatic to be back on stage in front of audiences. This is the conversation I am recalling in my mind as audience members whisper to me about her health. This is the reason I decline to speculate, I figure Shange would do what Shange came to do. Perform poems. Dance. Take Names.

The return to the stage at Blue Note feels like a homecoming for Shange. She explains " I began working in night clubs with musicians reading my poetry. That is how for colored girls started. I feel like it's the beginning again."

At the start of the night, the announcer welcomes the audience to Blue Note, painfully mispronouncing her name. The audience rumbled, rolling their eyes in her defense while yelling "*Its N-to-ZAH-kee **SHAHNG**-gay. Her name is N-to-ZAH-kee **SHAHNG**-ga!*" said many voices from neighboring tables.

When the musicians William "Spaceman" Patterson & Michael Raye take the stage the audience tosses their annoyance aside and settles in for the show. Shange soon followed. The audience gives a standing ovation before she utters a word.

She came out swinging. Normally Shange likes to ease audiences into her work offering safety at the start of her sets but she had something to say about PRIDE. Her opening poem, ODE TO ORLANDO is about the [Orlando Night Club Tragedy](#). In June 2016, 49 people were killed and 58 wounded due to hate a crime inside Pulse, a gay nightclub in Orlando, Florida. Shange lyrically takes audiences to the inside of Pulse nightclub where the black and brown queer bodies gather to celebrate Pride month. Her poem collages stories of her daughter who could've been there but wasn't there. This poem is timely and tender, embracing the spirit of Pride season while not forgetting the need for LGBTQ liberation all year around.

She shares a poem titled LOOSENING STRINGS, OR GIVE ME AN "A". Shange, a self-described Black girl who grew up listening to "white boys who sang weird harmonies that all sound the same" on the radio states "Yes, Eric Clapton made me want to have a child named Layla." She has a sense of humor. The audience laughs in tune with her confessions.

Shange like a bandleader of a jazz orchestra moves us through experiences that are terrifying and soft. In THERE ARE NO MARKERS, she reminds us of the brutal reality of Blackness in America. She draws the audience into her world with I had five nose rings.

I had five nose rings

a gold circle

a silver circle

a star

nefertiti

& a half moon

without these I am unarmed

not ready for arbitrary violence

There is no question that Shange captivates audiences. Her poetry, her presence her aura is magnetic. We have heard her words in cafes in local theaters, on Broadway and in Hollywood performed by some of the greatest Black actresses of all time, yet there is nothing like hearing Shange perform her own work. She is beautiful and particular. It is this closeness with her, her words, her journey that audiences are still yearning for 40 years after for colored girls took Broadway by storm at the Booth Theatre in NYC.