



HEADSHOTS: NTOZAKE SHANGE & ERIKA DICKERSON-DESPENZA

THE PUBLIC THEATER, THE BARNARD CENTER FOR RESEARCH ON WOMEN, AND THE NTOZAKE SHANGE LITERARY TRUST ANNOUNCE INAUGURAL NTOZAKE SHANGE SOCIAL JUSTICE THEATER RESIDENCY WITH PLAYWRIGHT ERIKA DICKERSON-DESPENZA

Monumental Partnership Between Preeminent Nonprofit Theater and Educational Institution Establishes First Residency of its Kind for Distinguished Women, Femmes, and Non-binary Playwrights of the African Diaspora

September 15, 2022 – The Public Theater (Oskar Eustis, Artistic Director and Patrick Willingham, Executive Director), the Barnard Center for Research on Women (Premilla Nadasen, Claire Tow Professor of History, and Janet Jakobsen, Claire Tow Professor of Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies, Co-Directors), and the Ntozake Shange Literary Trust have announced the establishment of **The Ntozake Shange Social Justice Theater Residency**. Conceived by inaugural playwright **Erika Dickerson-Despenza**, this rotating two-year playwriting residency is named in honor of Public Theater artist and Barnard alumna (Class of 1970) **Ntozake Shange**, one of the world's most revered writers and a fierce advocate for women and the dignity of humankind. Awarded to a distinguished woman, femme, trans, or non-binary playwright of the African Diaspora, the residency will provide a salary with benefits and full support to pursue their creative work as a playwright.

“Despite the many debuts of Shange’s works at The Public Theater, there was nothing named for her; there was no enduring evidence of her legacy within the institution. Part of the work of my work, a la Toni Cade Bambara, is ancestral elevation and reverence. Ntozake Shange is my literary mother and creating the Ntozake Shange Social Justice Playwriting Residency allows me to cement her legacy in the cultural memory of The Public Theater, NYC, and the American Theater at large while also building my own,” said playwright **Erika Dickerson-Despenza**.

Dickerson-Despenza continued, “I have crafted a residency that will outlast me; one that will enable women, femmes, and non-binary scholar-playwrights of the African Diaspora who help shape the future by writing about and beyond the crises of their time to have a comfortable salary, healthcare, and access to the most prestigious and resourced Off-Broadway theaters and Barnard College, home of Shange’s archives and the groundbreaking Barnard Center for Research on Women.”

Literary Trustee **Donald S. Sutton** said, “Establishment of the Ntozake Shange Social Justice Playwright Residency realizes the often-articulated dream of Ntozake Shange that her work would serve as an inspiration and a platform for the creativity and talent of other women of color.”

Ntozake Shange’s groundbreaking choreopoem *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf* premiered at The Public in 1976 with direction by Oz Scott, choreography by Paula Moss, and featured Shange as “Lady in Orange.” The production won the 1977 Obie Award for Distinguished Production and transferred to Broadway later that year, where it was nominated for a Tony Award for Best Play and Trazana Beverley received the Tony Award for Best Featured Actress. In fall of 2019, The Public revived the production for the first time in over 40 years, and in 2022, it transferred to Broadway, directed and choreographed by Camille A. Brown, earning seven Tony nominations. The original Broadway production of *for colored girls...* remains the longest-running straight play by an African American writer in Broadway history.

“Ntozake Shange was a brave and brilliant pioneer, changing the American Theater landscape and changing the way Black women are perceived in the United States. I am thrilled to be joining with Barnard, where Ntozake studied and where her papers now reside, in honoring her. Barnard is an extraordinary school and our shared values make this partnership a natural one,” said Public Theater Artistic Director **Oskar Eustis**. “And what better honor than to continue to support women, femmes, and non-binary playwrights of the African Diaspora? Erika Dickerson-Despenza, the first writer to hold this position, is both a brilliant playwright and a fierce social activist. Like Ntozake, her art is inseparable from her activism. Her talent and vision will enrich us all.”

Eustis continued, “This is what both universities and non-profit theaters need to do: provide jobs for writers and artists which are not dependent on capitalism and the tyranny of the market. Providing support for writers like Erika will bring cultural riches to Barnard and The Public, but more importantly her work will benefit the field and the nation as a whole. What a marvelous way to honor Ntozake!”

As a poet-playwright and womanist cultural memory worker, Erika Dickerson-Despenza's primary thematic foci are Black land legacies, Black apocalyptic ritual, and environmental racism. After serving as Tow Playwright-in-Residence from 2019-2020, she made her Public Theater debut in 2021 with *cullud wattah*, the Susan Smith Blackburn Prize-winning play about three generations of Black women living through the current water crisis in Flint, Michigan. Her upcoming production of *shadow/land*, directed by Candis C. Jones, will premiere at The Public in April 2023. Currently, Erika is developing a 10-play Katrina Cycle, which centers climate crisis-induced and state-sanctioned water vulnerabilities and displacement rippling in and beyond New Orleans and the Midwest. During this residency, Dickerson-Despenza will focus on writing a new play and formalizing and expanding the podcast series, “The Clearing.” She will also participate in a public event at Barnard in each of the two years, as well as offer masterclasses and other events for Barnard students.

The Barnard Center for Research on Women (BCRW), founded in 1971, is dedicated to weaving together critical feminist scholarship, social justice feminist activism, and the arts through a variety of projects—workshops, conferences, sponsored working groups, and invitational residencies for researchers, activists, and artists. BCRW will be the host of the residency and coordinate all elements of Barnard’s portion of this collaboration. The College promotes academic excellence across the disciplines and is home to the Ntozake Shange Papers in the Barnard Library Archives

and Special Collections. On **Thursday, October 13**, Barnard will host a special one-night-only event in the Diana Center to commemorate the establishment of this residency.

“Ntozake Shange has had an immense impact at the College, in New York City, and across the world. She’s made invaluable contributions as a poet, playwright, novelist, and Black feminist,” said Barnard President **Sian Leah Beilock**. “I’m so pleased this partnership will allow us to build on her extraordinary and inspirational legacy and will support the work of those who follow in her footsteps.”

“We are thrilled about this historic partnership between Barnard, The Public, and the Shange Literary Trust, which uplifts Black women playwrights, giving them visibility, a platform to share their craft, and an opportunity to pass on their knowledge and expertise to the next generation,” said Barnard Professor and BCRW Co-Director **Premilla Nadasen**. “Shange, a Barnard graduate, was a trailblazer who went on to become one of the world’s most renowned poets and playwright. We are honored to have Erika Dickerson-Despenza, who builds on Shange’s legacy, as the inaugural recipient of the Ntozake Shange Residency. Erika’s brilliance is evident in her award-winning work, which speaks to pressing social issues in a profound and deeply impactful way.”

“Ntozake wanted her archive to be a space of infinite possibility at Barnard that would encourage us to live and create innovatively and purposefully,” said Barnard Professor **Kim Hall**. “We have missed her visits that so electrified and inspired our students, so it is beyond thrilling to welcome Erika here and to work with her to nurture and expand Ntozake’s legacy of Black Feminist world-making.”

For more information and to learn about supporting future Ntozake Shange Social Justice Theater Residencies, click [here](#).

BIOS

NTOZAKE SHANGE, increasingly recognized as one of America’s greatest writers, has for 50 years embodied the struggle of women of color for equality and the recognition of their contribution to human culture. Her "choreo-poem," *for colored girls who have considered suicide/ when the rainbow is enuf*, recorded a two and a half year run on Broadway and has remained in print since 1974. That production retains its title as the longest-running play by an African American writer in Broadway history. A revival of *for colored girls...*, opened in the 2022 Broadway season to unanimous critical acclaim and seven Tony Award nominations. Ntozake’s literary legacy, preserved in the Shange Institute at Barnard College, comprises 13 plays, seven novels, six children’s books, and 19 poetry collections, the majority of which are published and in print. She is posthumously inducted into both the New York State Writers Association and the Off-Broadway Alliance Halls of Fame. Her poetry collection *Wild Beauties* was received enthusiastically in 2018. A posthumous re-issue of her popular *If I Can Cook, You Know God Can* was released in January 2019 and a semi-autobiographical work entitled *Dance We Do* in 2020--both from Beacon Press. A compendium of unpublished works by Ntozake Shange is due out from Hachette in early 2023.

ERIKA DICKERSON-DESPENZA is a New Orleans-based Blk radical leftist poet-playwright and womanist cultural memory worker. Afrosurrealism, magical realism, narrative re/memory, kinesthetic imagination and Black queer women’s interiority and erotic fugitivity are conceptual preoccupations of her work. Erika’s primary thematic foci are Black land legacies, Black apocalyptic ritual, and environmental racism. Her work occupies sites of intimate reckoning, situating rupture in traditionally sacred or “safe” spaces to make invisible systems of environmental oppression and cultural trauma visible and ultimately ask us to consider abolitionist

political ecologies. Her productions include *shadow/land* (The Public Theater, 2023), *cullud wattah* (The Public Theater, 2021), and *[hieroglyph]* (San Francisco Playhouse/Lorraine Hansberry Theatre, 2021). Currently, Erika is developing a 10-play Katrina Cycle, which centers climate crisis-induced and state-sanctioned water vulnerabilities and displacement rippling in and beyond New Orleans and the Midwest. These works explore the politics of disgust, shame and refusal by highlighting the rupture of government intervention at the intersection of capitalism and environmental racism and its impact on dispossessed peoples. Dickerson-Despenza has been awarded the Susan Smith Blackburn Prize (2021), the Laurents/Hatcher Foundation Award (2020), the Thom Thomas Award (2020), the Lilly Award (2020), the Barrie and Bernice Stavis Award (2020), the Grist 50 Fixer (2020), and the Princess Grace Playwriting Award (2019). She has received residencies and fellowships including Tow Playwright-in-Residence at The Public Theater (2019-2020), U.S. Water Alliance National Arts & Culture Delegate (2019), New York Stage and Film Fellow-in-Residence (2019), New Harmony Project Writer-in Residence (2019), Dramatists Guild Foundation Fellow (2018-2019), and The Lark Van Lier New Voices Fellow (2018). Her commissions include work for Climate Change Theatre Action, The Public Theater, Studio Theatre & Williamstown Theatre Festival. She was previously a member of Grist, Ars Nova Play Group (2019-2021) and Youngblood Collective (2018-2021).

ABOUT

BARNARD

COLLEGE

Barnard provides a singular educational experience, as a world-renowned college focused on excellence across the arts and sciences, with all the academic resources of Columbia University and the City of New York as an extended classroom. Founded in 1889, Barnard was one of the few colleges in the nation where women could receive the same rigorous and challenging education available to men. Today, Barnard is one of the most selective academic institutions in the country and remains devoted to empowering extraordinary women to become even more exceptional. For more information on Barnard College, contact Barnard Media Relations at 212-854-2037 or mediarelations@barnard.edu. To learn more, follow Barnard on [Instagram](#), [Twitter](#), and [Facebook](#).

ABOUT BCRW

In 1971, Barnard students, faculty, and staff founded the Barnard Women's Center, the first of its kind in the country. BCRW's founding took place in the midst of feminist, Black freedom, anti-war, and Third World Liberation movements, international student mobilizations, and the parallel creation of Black studies, ethnic studies, and women's studies programs at universities across the country. For 50 years, BCRW has built a bridge between students, scholars, activists, artists, neighbors, and our communities beyond New York through public events, publications, multimedia projects, and working groups. From our signature annual Scholar and Feminist Conference to our peer-reviewed journal *The Scholar and Feminist Online*, our unique collection of feminist social movement ephemera housed in the Barnard College Archives and a constantly expanding video archive, and the Social Justice Initiative and the new Ntozake Shange Social Justice Theater Residency, BCRW brings scholars and activists together to foment intersectional social justice feminist analyses and promote social transformation.

ABOUT THE NTOZAKE SHANGE LITERARY TRUST

The Trust was established by Ntozake Shange in 2017 and commissioned to preserve, manage and promote the Shange literary legacy comprising 13 plays, seven novels and 19 poetry

collections. Directed by the Executor of the Shange estate, Paul T. Williams, Jr. and managed by Literary Trustee, Donald S. Sutton, the Trust has, since Ntozake's passing in 2018, published three books, re-issued the play *for colored girls...* in print and oversees development of two new volumes of archival works drawn on the Shange Archives at Barnard College. Adaptations of Shange works in the opera format and performance art genre continue in current development. Celebrated revivals of *for colored girls...* at The Public Theater in 2019 and on Broadway in 2022 were presented by license from the Trust, the latter garnering a straight play record for the season of seven TONY Award nominations.

ABOUT THE PUBLIC THEATER

THE PUBLIC continues the work of its visionary founder Joe Papp as a civic institution engaging, both on-stage and off, with some of the most important ideas and social issues of today. Conceived over 60 years ago as one of the nation's first nonprofit theaters, The Public has long operated on the principles that theater is an essential cultural force and that art and culture belong to everyone. Under the leadership of Artistic Director Oskar Eustis and Executive Director Patrick Willingham, The Public's wide breadth of programming includes an annual season of new work at its landmark home at Astor Place, Free Shakespeare in the Park at The Delacorte Theater in Central Park, the Mobile Unit touring throughout New York City's five boroughs, Public Forum, Under the Radar, Public Lab, Public Works, Public Shakespeare Initiative, and Joe's Pub. Since premiering *HAIR* in 1967, The Public continues to create the canon of American Theater and is currently represented on Broadway by the Tony Award-winning musical *Hamilton* by Lin-Manuel Miranda and the upcoming production of *Ain't No Mo'* by Jordan E. Cooper. Their programs and productions can also be seen regionally across the country and around the world. The Public has received 60 Tony Awards, 184 Obie Awards, 56 Drama Desk Awards, 59 Lortel Awards, 34 Outer Critic Circle Awards, 13 New York Drama Critics' Circle Awards, 58 AUDELCO Awards, 6 Antonyo Awards, and 6 Pulitzer Prizes. publictheater.org.

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