

The Herald-Sun

Stories that have not been told

Audience to get preview of 'The Clothesline Muse'

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[Cliff Bellamy](#)



Submitted/Courtesy of the Durham Arts Council

Council Nnenna Freelon (in photo) and her daughter Maya Freelon Asante will present a preview of "The Clothesline Muse" Thursday at the Durham Arts Council.

DURHAM —

The clothesline was once the place where people hung laundry to dry. It also was a catalyst for socializing, for neighborhood connection, even play.

In "The Clothesline Muse," a new multi-disciplinary theater project, it becomes symbolic, a way of "telling stories that haven't been told," said vocalist Nnenna Freelon.

Freelon has written the songs (and a book) for this new piece. Durham residents will get a first view of this work in progress Thursday during a performance at the Durham Arts Council.

"The Clothesline Muse" pays tribute to women who washed clothes, did domestic work and other jobs "so that we could have a better future," according to an artists' statement. Freelon calls the piece "an

effort to gather stories and acknowledge and appreciate ... the work of survival” and raising families. “There’s no Grammy award for that,” she said.

It is a work of “devised theater,” meaning that the story does not start from a script, but from gathering research, stories, memories and collaboration. The other collaborators are Kariamuwelsh, who choreographed dances based on folding, drying and other laundry movements, and Maya Freelon Asante, a visual artist whose contributions include photographs, film projections and a built set. All three have family connections. Nnenna Freelon is Maya Freelon Asante’s mother, and Welsh is Maya’s mother-in-law.

In addition to her original songs, Nnenna Freelon also plays the role of The Muse. To prepare for the role, and to write her songs, she has been interviewing women who did laundry and other domestic jobs.

Her research led her to the history of the Atlanta Washerwoman Strike of 1881. Atlanta was dependent upon the services of African-American women who did laundry. Twenty women formed a trade organization, demanding a rate of \$1 for every 12 pounds of wash. Other workers joined them, and the number of strikers grew to 3,000, according to the website of the AFL-CIO.

The story inspired Freelon. “These women had the chutzpah to go against the established power of their time,” she said. The strike was an early example of “women redefining their role, and recognizing their power.”

The basic story of “The Clothesline Muse” is about the relationship of a grandmother and granddaughter. The younger woman sees her grandmother as “a relic of the past,” but the grandmother “is wanting to give this girl child some lessons of life,” Freelon said.

The cast of the play has six dancers and live music. Thursday’s performance is a sneak peek, but also a fundraiser to bring the production to Durham. “The Clothesline Muse” will begin a national tour in March 2014, and will come to the Durham Arts Council in early 2015.

The audience will be able to ask questions at the performance, and Freelon said she expects to hear more stories about memories of clotheslines. (More stories may be added to the play, she said.)

She wants the play to encourage conversations between the generations. “The conversation between generations, it’s not happening,” Freelon said, “so we are hoping that people will go to their grandparents and say, What was life like ... in 1920?”

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