

The State Of Things

12:05 PM

WED NOVEMBER 20, 2013

The Clothesline Muse

BY [LAURA LEE](#) AND [FRANK STASIO](#)



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Credit The Clothesline Muse

The Clothesline Muse is a new multi-discipline theater project.

In the past, the clothesline was a place where a community's women met to hang laundry.

It was also the space where women could socialize and share their common struggles. By doing so, the clothesline transformed from the space of a domestic chore into a means for empowerment and identity.

“When you looked at the clothesline, you could tell who lived in the house, the ages. You could tell whether there was a man there or not... It was a communal place,” said [Nnenna Freelon](#), the creator of [The Clothesline Muse](#), a new theatrical project.

Freelon and her collaborators uses jazz vocals, paper art, and dance to as a way to pay tribute to the domestic labor of past generations. Freelon is a Grammy-nominated jazz artist whose music career has been celebrated the world over. But The Clothesline Muse gave her a chance to look back at the lesser-known work of her predecessors.

“This is an opportunity for me to do research on what it took for my mother, my grandmother, and my great-grandmother to keep house,” said Freelon.

“And there's no Grammy nomination for raising good kids, for keeping the house. So we're hoping to bring light and to place this on the stage in such a way that it says this too is art,” she continued.

As the Clothesline Muse is a celebration of history and family, Freelon invited her own family to collaborate on the project. Her daughter, [Maya Freelon Asante](#), created the set and projections that play

throughout the show. Freelon Asante's mother-in-law Kariamuwelsh choreographed of the performance.

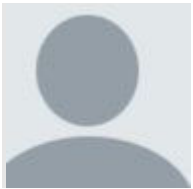
"Being submerged into this beautiful production, I found joy in creating quilt-like pieces that go up on the clothesline using the clothesline as an art tool," Freelon Asante said.

Though Freelon Asante belongs to a generation that never used a clothes line, her participation in this project reframed her perspective on her family history.

"[My grandmother] used to always say that she came from a family of sharecroppers who never got their fair share," said Freelon Asante.

"She was waiting for someone to do this honoring, to lift them up," she continued, referencing the current project.

The Clothesline Muse is a work in progress. Freelon hopes to turn it into a national tour over next year. [Click here for more information about a November 21st preview showing at the Durham Arts Council.](#)



greta

• 2 days ago

This brought memories back of helping my mother with clothes washing in rural Missouri in the '60's. We did not have running water. Rain water was collected in raised barrels from the porch roof. We siphoned the water from a barrel into a ringer washer outdoors. Three loads would be done in the same water. First whites, then colors, then darks. I helped run the clothes through the ringer into the rinse tub and then from the rinse tub to the laundry basket. My mother would feed the clothes into the ringer and I would catch them on the other side. If you didn't pay attention, the clothes would wind around the ringer and then everything would come to a halt while the ringer rollers were separated and the clothes disentangled. In the winter, the water was icy cold and our fingers would become red and numb. We always hung the clothes on the line to dry. When my brothers grew up and opened a furniture store, they offered my mother an automatic washer. She refused. They used too much water.

Now I have a front loading washer that probably uses less water for 3 loads than that old wringer washer and rinse tub. I always use a clothesline to dry clothes. I call it my "solar dryer". I celebrate the idea of bringing back the clothesline to more people. Dryers consume so much energy and heat the house in the summer requiring the air conditioners to work even harder.



WUNC greta

• a day ago

Thanks for sharing your story!



Karen Crumbliss

• 2 days ago

So many other thoughts ... mine being not of domestic labor for others, but for one's own family! My mom, during WWII, had to move her growing family from town to town in freezing Minnesota as my dad recruited for the Navy from one southern Minnesota farm town to another. I have never understood how the clothes, which froze in the winter, ever dried! (But the sheets sure smelled good when they did!) What work it was to live in so many different apartments that were so hard to find, to run up and down stairs with wet clothes to hang on the line (when it was free from other people's clothes), all while caring for three pre-school children. Hard work! It's only recently that our clothes-washing has become so relatively easy!

Clotheslines are still prominent in many parts of Europe (and even more so in other parts of the world.) We used them recently while living in Italy in the apartment of an upper-middle-class couple ... after washing by hand or in an extremely ineffective washing machine!

As for children playing, the clothesline makes a great play house with blankets and sheets thrown over them, stabilized with clothes pins!

Kudos, Nnenna! Your project will bring up many important ideas about the work of women in our world, past and present!



WUNC Karen Crumbliss

• a day ago

Love this story. Thank you for sharing.