

'THE CLOTHESLINE MUSE'

Memories of women's work are recalled through song, dance and theater

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By Eddie Huffman / Special to Go Triad

Most people used to hang wet clothes outdoors to dry, and that laundry told a lot of stories.

"People would judge each other by the cleanliness of the clothes on their line," said Nnenna Freelon, an acclaimed jazz singer, speaking by phone from her home in Durham. "If Miss So-and-So left her clothes out past a couple of days, you went over there to check on her."

Clotheslines also can tell stories about class, work, history and the environment. Freelon, 60, addresses those themes in a new production called "The Clothesline Muse," which she, another actor and a dance troupe will perform on Jan. 29 at the High Point Theatre.

The origins of the multi-disciplinary work date back about five years to a short dance piece by choreographer Kariamuwelsh, mother-in-law of Freelon's daughter, Maya Freelon Asante.

"There was such an incredible response," said Freelon, who has earned six Grammy nominations and toured with Ray Charles, Ellis Marsalis, Al Jarreau, George Benson and Herbie Hancock. "People sharing memories of clotheslines, memories of what that community was like and what women's work was like. She was inspired to expand it into a larger work."

Initially, Freelon and Welsh traded stories about their clothesline memories. Then they started doing research, talking to older women. They found women who had done laundry to earn a living — and sang songs to help get them through it.

"It was very hot work," Freelon said. "It's hard work; it's physically demanding work. And they just pulled on that spiritual body of music to accompany the work."

Freelon wrote new songs for the production and collected traditional and spiritual songs to sing, as well. She and her collaborators funded the project by piecing together grants and more than \$22,000 raised via crowd funding.

Freelon stars as Grandma Blu. Her character's granddaughter, played by Cloteal Horne, arrives to take Grandma Blu to an assisted-living facility. The piece portrays the conflicts between the two women as Freelon's character resists leaving her home — and the generational conflicts between a senior who worked as a laundress and a young woman who airs her dirty laundry on the Internet.

"Each article of clothing Grandma Blu pulls out of basket has a story and a dance associated with it," Freelon said. Asante created "a beautiful tissue-paper sculpture" that serves as the backdrop to the stage, representing "the strength and fragility of life," Freelon said.

Welsh choreographed dance sequences to illustrate the work and Grandma Blu's stories.

One of those stories is about a labor movement organized by washerwomen in Reconstruction-era Atlanta. "When Grandma thinks of something — for example, when she talks about the 1881 washerwomen's strike — there are projections, there is dance associated with it, there is music associated with that moment in the

play,” Freelon said. “The dancers help to illustrate the physicality of the work, and Kariamu Welsh has done an incredible job detaching the movements — the rubbing, the scrubbing, the use of the arms and the backs and the legs. When she detached it from the actual doing of the work, they are beautiful movements.”

“The Clothesline Muse” premiered in Philadelphia in 2014. Lisa Bardarson, reviewing the piece for “Thinking Dance,” said it “is not just about family lineage and the impact that previous generations bring to bear upon its fledgling members, but is also a testament to the creative talents inherent within the Welsh/Freelon/Asante family.”

The High Point performance is part of a tour taking “The Clothesline Muse” from Florida to Texas between now and April. Freelon sings to prerecorded tracks because of budget constraints, but she has grand plans for the future.

“When it goes to Broadway, I’m going to have a full band,” she said.

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