

'Muse' weaves tales told by the threads



Grammy-nominated jazz singer Nnenna Freelon stars in and wrote the music for "The Clothesline Muse," a multi-disciplinary theater project that mixes drama, dance, original songs and visual art. Photo courtesy of UNCW's Office of Cultural Arts

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Secrets hide in the clothes.

So do stories – you've probably got one about your favorite T-shirt, dress or pair of pants.

The tales tied up in the clothes we wear – some painful, others joyful – are at the heart of "The Clothesline Muse." The uncommon blend of original songs, drama, dance and visual art – its website calls "Muse" a "multi-discipline theater project" – is being staged on Saturday at [Kenan Auditorium](#) by the University of North Carolina Wilmington's Office of Cultural Arts. The show stars and was partly developed by jazz singer Nnenna Freelon, a six-time Grammy nominee who lives in Durham, and it's her rich, soulful vocals that give the show its backbone.

Freelon plays Grandma Blu, an aging, African-American laundress who's being moved into an old-folks home by her granddaughter, Mary Mack, played by Cloteal L. Horne. Unpacking her things as quickly as her granddaughter can pack them, Grandma Blu unspools memories in story and songs, often accompanied by projections and dancers.

"All of the stories in the piece come directly from the clothes," Freelon said last week during an interview at Williston Middle School, where she's been since March 16 as part of [UNCW](#)'s Artist in Residence Program and ARTworks educational outreach initiative (see story, 1A). There, with her daughter, Maya Freelon Asante, she's been teaching some of the subtle lessons – like respect for elders and history – that "The Clothesline Muse" imparts.

By the end of the 85-minute show, Freelon said, Grandma Blu impresses on her granddaughter “that she has to be the one who carries the basket of knowledge and of family history.”

Sewing up a show

The role of Grandma Blu is a departure for Freelon, who's known as a singer.

“A song, if it's five minutes long, is a five-minute notion, your one-act play,” Freelon said. “That's part of what's sustaining me in this, but it's way harder.”

“The Clothesline Muse” was born five years ago as a short dance piece staged at Temple University by Kariam Welsh, a choreographer whose awards include a Guggenheim Fellowship.

“She got such an incredible response, with people coming up to her afterward saying things like, 'I remember those times, the smell of the laundry,’” Freelon said. “She realized that she had touched on something pretty profound, a memory buried in this mundane activity.”

Welsh, who is also the mother-in-law of Freelon's daughter Maya, suggested that the piece could be transformed into an evening-length work.

“We had a very naive notion that I would sing, Maya could do (set design) and there would be dancers and it would somehow all become theater,” Freelon said with a chuckle. “Three years later, many bumps and bruises, you (still) have this dream.”

During that time, Freelon created tunes based on work songs, blues and gospel. Some use clothes-washing metaphors to talk about painful subjects, like “Separating Whites and Colors,” which is about segregation. Welsh's dances reflect the motions of drying, folding and ironing, and Asante's colorful tissue-paper tapestries hang like laundry drying in the sun.

Eventually, grants were secured from the New England Foundation for the Arts, the National Performance Network and the National Endowment for the Arts. The expanded “Clothesline Muse” premiered in Philadelphia in 2013. Since then, it's played in West Palm Beach, Fla., and gone on a tour of North Carolina colleges and universities. After its engagement at UNCW, the show will go to Dallas.

A family affair

As the piece developed, Freelon said she and her collaborators were challenged to label “The Clothesline Muse.” Is a musical? A “dance concert”? Or something else?

Eventually, they let the words of a director they worked with guide them: “If it feels like truth, worry about what you call it later,” Freelon recalled. “Or don't call it anything. Call it an experience.”

Other challenges came from “Muse” being “a family affair,” Freelon said.

“I wouldn't suggest that you do a collaborative project with your relatives,” she said, laughing. “When conflict comes, and conflict inevitably does come ... you're weighing what you want to say (against) the relationship.”

Ultimately, however, “I think it's made the three of us much closer,” Freelon said. Asante likened the project to being “in this sandwich of love.”

There's a lot going on in “The Clothesline Muse,” but when you boil it down, it's really about the power of stories to bring us together.

“This is what you want in theater, a safe place to express the unexpressable,” Freelon said. “If we want the next generation to be healthier than we were, we have to find safe places to talk about hard things.”