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Q&A: Nnenna Freelon

The Grammy-nominated jazz singer talks about a work she co-created, *The Clothesline Muse*, playing at TeCo Theatrical Productions.

by Lisa Ross

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Photo: Chris Charles

The Clothesline Muse is playing at TeCo Theatrical Productions

Dallas — Nnenna Freelon is a Grammy-nominated jazz singer, performer and writer. Her latest passion project, *The Clothesline Muse*, is currently on stage at the Bishop Arts Theater Center in Oak Cliff, co-presented by TeCo Theatrical Productions and Southern Methodist University's Meadows School of the Arts through the National Performance Network.

Muse is a devised theater and dance piece that combines a narrative about an African-American grandmother (played by Freelon) and her granddaughter, using the idea of clothes and the clothesline as a metaphor for the human condition; along with dance that is inspired by African dance and classical ballet, choreographed by Kariamu Welsh. Freelon, Welsh and Maya Freelon Asante cowrote the work, which plays through the matinee on Saturday, April 4.

TheaterJones talked to Freelon about creating the work, its inspiration and the idea of taking a break from modern technology.

TheaterJones: The spectrum of who you are is captured in this work. You've poured your heart and soul into it—you are producer, writer and composer. Why is it so multi-dimensional?

Nnenna Freelon: This is my passion project. This is my baby. I wanted to be on Broadway and perform in a play. The Lord spoke to me and said, "If you want to be in a play—be in a play. You have many plays in you." I needed to be obedient to the call. It wasn't until I stopped whining and complaining about lack that God took care of the "how." It's when I said, "Yes, Lord." On every single level it's been a walk of faith. We have five dancers, a wonderful actress and the choreography is stunning with both African and ballet influences. This is a National Theatre Production, which rarely happens for an inaugural work. And, we recently learned that we were accepted at the National Black Theatre Festival. I'm incredibly humbled and proud.

How was the piece developed?

It was developed by three muses: Maya Freelon Asante, my daughter, coordinated with Hampton University and designed the sculpture that's on the stage; Dr. Kariamu Welsh, Director of the Institute for African Dance and Research and Performance at Temple University; and myself. We wanted to inspire an intergenerational conversation.

The metaphor of the clothesline is reminiscent of life in Black America of conversations at the kitchen table. But it could actually be any table. What did we learn at those places?

The metaphor is very extendable and very doable. It could be the Jewish woman's clothesline or the Chinese woman. The clothesline is where we pinned-up those virtues and life skills that we shared as a community. There is an intimacy at the clothesline. We really want to invoke and create whole space for the conversation to happen. By looking at the clothesline you could determine the value structure of that home. If there were tablecloths for instance the assumption was that there must be teacups in the home. If men's clothes were on the line it meant of course you had a man in the home. The clothesline even spoke to what kind of housekeeper you were. There was a pride in how white your sheets were. Or if there were diapers, the community knew there was a baby.

So, the clothesline was not only a much needed ritual where important conversations occurred, but also a statement of purpose?

Absolutely. Recently, I posted on our Facebook page the question, "If you could pin up something for your children what would it be? Passion? Peace? Joy? I say, before we were online we were on the clothesline. We have to charge our young women to create their communities otherwise we risk being irrelevant. We have to think about how we create conversations. Where is the common ground? What ties us together rather than tears us apart?"

Why is having the conversation important?

I feel like our quest to give our children something is lacking. In a way we have failed. If you look out your window and see that things are bad we must own that and I'm not just talking about urban communities. If our children don't know our history we are responsible for that. It all begins and ends with a story—speaking and listening to each other. The virtual world makes the conversation more difficult. We're in the same room but we're not really communicating because it lacks intimacy. Years ago people would write letters, talk, and share stories at the kitchen table, at the clothesline. Another reason having the conversation is important is because the pop culture frames the black culture and assigns it an aesthetic. However, underneath it lies an insidious reverberation of stereotypes. Black people play into that as well. So, we must tell our stories and there are so many to be told.

The advent of social media has become a gift and a curse?

Everything is about sound bites now and we're under the illusion that we're having real conversations. It's superficial. Also, we're committed to the hilt, which interrupts opportunities to breathe and take time and bless our communities, our women. We have failed in some aspects to pass along our experiences. How are we going to learn how it is to be a real woman if we don't take those moments to share? The clothesline is that place where we discussed whatever we needed to discuss in a safe space.

What was your research like?

We conducted many, many interviews with women, perhaps 50. We had historical documents, and even slave narratives. We spoke with one woman, Ms. Esther Thomas, the first African American woman to integrate the schools in Wilmington. She's 91-years-old. The washer woman was a much needed job in the slave economy. Washing clothes by hand was incredibly difficult work.

You really address the force and empowerment of women in this piece.

Yes! The very first labor union was formed by African-American women in 1881 [20 years after slavery was abolished]. Those women wrote a letter to the mayor of Atlanta, and said we're not washing your clothes anymore. Atlanta was totally dependent on these women for the washing of clothes. They shut the entire system down and demanded to get a dollar for 12-pounds of laundry!

Dr. Tera Hunter, a phenomenal historian at Princeton helped bring that piece of history into the play and we were able to bust the myth of a woman's work or the washerwoman being totally subservient. These women had the wherewithal to claim their power. It's so inspiring. **TJ**