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# The Clothesline Muse



**Press Kit**





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THE INTERNATIONAL REVIEW OF AFRICAN AMERICAN ART PLUS  
EXTENDING THE COVERAGE OF THE PRINT JOURNAL



# Tavis Smiley - PBS

<http://www.pbs.org/wnet/tavissmiley/interviews/singer-playwright-nnenna-freelon/>

Jan 28, 2015

## ***Singer-Playwright Nnenna Freelon***

The jazz vocalist-actress-composer-playwright and six-time Grammy nominee discusses her stage production, "The Clothesline Muse," which is currently touring the country.

Nnenna Freelon can really do it all. The six-time Grammy nominated jazz singer has earned the reputation as one of the most compelling performers in the business. She learned from the greats, having toured with the likes of Ray Charles, Ellis Marsalis, Al Jarreau, George Benson, and others. In 2014, Nnenna starred in the critically acclaimed show "Georgia on My Mind: Celebrating the Music of Ray Charles" at the Venetian Hotel in Las Vegas. Nnenna is showcasing the whole spectrum of her talents in her latest project as the writer, composer and producer of the original theatrical presentation of "The Clothesline Muse," a work of dance, music, spoken word and vibrant art. She is also one of the stars of the musical theater piece.



<http://video.pbs.org/widget/partnerplayer/2365413458/>

**Tavis Smiley**  
 She's a six-time Grammy nominee, and a world-renowned singer, performer, composer, and actress. But tonight, Nnenna Freelon opens up about what may be her most precious creative endeavor to date: an empowering stage production titled "THE CLOTHESLINE MUSE." She shares with us what makes this play, which is currently on a nationwide tour, so near and dear to her heart. Catch our conversation TONIGHT on PBS! <http://ow.ly/HZ9Fu/>

**Singer-Playwright Nnenna Freelon**  
 | Interviews | Tavis Smiley | PBS  
 The jazz vocalist-actress-composer-playwright and six-time Grammy nominee discusses her stage production, "The Clothesline Muse," which is...

Like Comment Share 69 7 11

Jenny Gallagher, Charles Masley, Patricia Vasirella and 83 others like this.

11 shares

View 5 more comments

Richard Hinesen Watching now. You and Ms. Freelon have MY gratitude. I work up, not a euphemism, in the middle of the day right, not a euphemism, to recognize how grateful I am and validate my plan to give back, gonna become an interdenial-intellect this summer, expanding my new 2 years career as a schoolteacher. P.S. I've done my own laundry my entire adult life. Proper respect teacher...

Like Reply January 28 at 5:50am

Sherril Whittington Hi, Freelon stated my thoughts so well I believe personally on a spiritual level that those sleeping rights we're having with our bread-and-butter and our privileged selves are because we have not brought into balance that fairness for those who have made the way for us.

**Tavis Smiley** @tavissmiley · Jan 28  
 2nite on @PBS author @Connellybooks & actor @welliver\_titus talk @BoschAmazon + @OfficialNnenna on her play @tc\_muse! [ow.ly/HZ9Fu](http://ow.ly/HZ9Fu)

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**Tavis Smiley** @tavissmiley · Jan 28  
 2nite on @PBS singer-playwright @OfficialNnenna discusses her latest passion project @tc\_muse + why it'll empower UI [ow.ly/HZ15f](http://ow.ly/HZ15f)

6 6

[View summary](#)



# My Carolina Today

<http://www.wncn.com/story/27538176/nnenna-freelon-and-john-brown-big-band-christmas>

Dec 3, 2014

***Jazz singer and composer Nnenna Freelon tells us about her new stage production The Clothesline Muse***

Nnenna is working on a theater project she created called The Clothesline Muse. It explores the clothesline as a metaphor for our community lifeline and its ties to our environment. It includes dance, percussive music, dance and a whole lot more!



<http://www.wncn.com/clip/10912638/nnenna-freelon-and-john-brown-big-band-christmas#.VN0uoi2oR-A>



# The State of Things

<http://wunc.org/post/clothesline-muse> Nov 20, 2013



<http://cpa.ds.npr.org/wunc/audio/2013/11/sot112013SegB.mp3>

## ***Vocalist Nnenna Freelon and visual artist Maya Freelon Asante describe their new multimedia performance, The Clothesline Muse***

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 Kariamu Welsh 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.



Raleigh

# BWW News Desk



<http://www.broadwayworld.com/raleigh/article/THE-CLOTHESLINE-MUSE-to-Kick-Off-Southeast-and-Midwestern-Tour-Jan-6-20141217>

## ***THE CLOTHESLINE MUSE to Kick Off Southeast and Midwestern Tour, Jan 6***

Dec 17, 2014

The Clothesline Muse celebrates African American culture, women's history, the Civil Rights struggle, and the emerging labor movement through original live music, emotive dance, brilliant visual art and projections. The story is told through the complex relationship between old-school and new cool.

In this dramatic and poignant tale that explores the clothesline as a metaphor for our community lifeline and its ties to our environment, Grandma Blu, an aging washerwoman and storyteller, desperately wants to share her clothesline legacy, part of the culture of the Old South, and her wisdom, before she passes on, with granddaughter Mary Mack. Mary, an emerging screenwriter, is a modern online woman who believes that speed and technology hold the keys to success. She is both a feminist and futurist wanting nothing to do with yesterday's washing drudgery and stories. Their relationship and the social traditions it represents and the history it tells, are told in *The Clothesline Muse*, a journey through laughter, tears, dance, story, song, and struggle.

The theatrical production was conceived by Dr. Kariamua Welsh and is directed by Rebecca Holderness. Kariamua Welsh's choreography transforms vernacular wash movements into poetic dance. Two-time Grammy nominated jazz vocalist [Nnenna Freelon](#) performs the role of Grandma Blu/The Clothesline Muse and is both storyteller and songstress, bringing her unique and stirring vocals to the self-penned original music. Cloteal Horne plays the role of Mary Mack.

This production is truly a family affair. Maya Freelon Asante, Nnenna's daughter and Welsh's daughter-in-law, has created vibrant tissue paper art that acts as a kinetic sculpture representing strength, fragility and the stories that connect us to each other and to the generations before us. "What makes this very special personally is that I wrote this in collaboration with Maya, my daughter, and Kariamua Welsh, her mother-in-law. It has been an amazing experience," said Nnenna. "The piece is devised theater which means that it's pulled from a variety of sources- historical, first voice stories and memoirs and well as interviews we conducted."

There will also be community outreach in each market. Something Nnenna does at every possible opportunity. From children's shows to college, community and other school visits, there will be workshops conversations, Q & A's and other interaction to ensure that the messages portrayed in the performances will be serve as social, historical and cultural conduits.

The Clothesline Muse was made possible with funding by the New England Foundation for the Arts' National Theater Project, with lead funding from The [Andrew W. Mellon](#) Foundation. [www.nefa.org](http://www.nefa.org)

The Clothesline Muse is a National Performance Network (NPN) Creation Fund Project co-commissioned by Painted Bride Art Center in partnership with St. Joseph's Historic Foundation, Inc./Hayti Heritage Center and NPN. The Creation Fund is supported by the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation, Ford Foundation, and the National Endowment for the Arts (a federal agency). For more information: [www.npnweb.org](http://www.npnweb.org).

The play begins a tour of the southeast and Midwestern United States on January 6, 2015 at the Raymond F. Kravis Center for the Performing Arts in West Palm Beach, Florida.

June/July 2014

## 1<sup>st</sup> Annual Woman's Issue

Nnenna and Mya collaborated on a musical, *The Clothesline Muse*, inspired by the social connections once forged by woman doing the laundry outdoors. Nnenna wrote the score, Maya produced still and moving images. It premiered in Philadelphia in March and a tour will launch in Durham next year.



**W**  
The Women's Issue

Photographed at Spectre Arts

**The Performers**

## Nnenna Freelon, 58 and Maya Freelon Asante, 31

Nnenna is a six-time Grammy-nominated jazz singer as well as a composer and producer who has performed at The White House, the Grammy Awards and even had a song of hers played on *Mad Men*. Nnenna has called Durham home since 1982, along with her husband, **Philip**, an architect, and her three grown children: Maya, **Pierce** and **Deen**. She and Philip live downtown in the **Kress Building**. "There's a quality of experience to living downtown. It's not always pretty. It's not always nice. But it's real. I love it." Maya Freelon Asante is a visual artist with a master's from the School of Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Her work has won awards, been exhibited in Paris, Ghana and elsewhere around the globe, and earned accolades from Maya Angelou, who said Maya's work "visualizes the truth about the vulnerability and power of the human being."

**A**s a girl in Boston, Nnenna sang in church - because of course she did. A dandy question: Did you do a lot of solos? "Oh, please," Nnenna says with a laugh. "I was the queen of solos."

And yet she didn't let herself think much about having a career as a singer. Armed with a degree in healthcare administration, "the plan was to sort of change the healthcare system. I was a modern woman wanting to do things other than art. Art is hard. Art is risky. That's the line I had in my head."

Then she moved to Durham. She found a "whole jazz community" at the **Salaam Cultural Center** and started singing more and more while keeping up with work and her growing family.

Then came the conundrum: Should she go to law school or otherwise stay on the professional track, or just go all in on music? Her mother told her, "Blossom where you are planted." "That statement just rocked my world," Nnenna says. "I realized there were jazz luminaries right here in Durham steps from my home. There were people who could teach me, mentor me right here in Durham. I am a product of the community. There would not be a Nnenna Freelon if not for the people of Durham."

The time and accolades came after that, but she didn't need to get over. She blossomed here, as did her children. Two of the three, **Pierce** and **Maya**, are respected artists in their own right.

Maya grew up here and returned a year ago with her husband and young child from Baltimore. "I was away for about 15 years. To come back and see how so much has changed for the better, I've just been amazed."

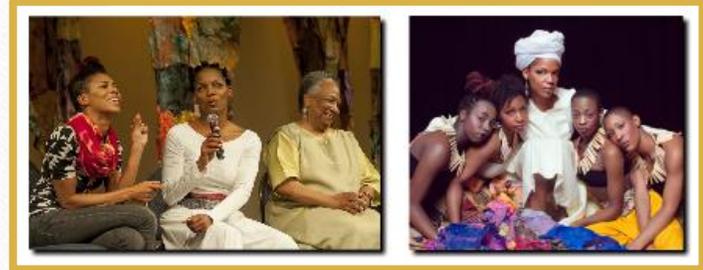
Nnenna and Maya collaborated on a musical, **The Clothesline Muse**, inspired by the social connections once forged by women doing the laundry outdoors. Nnenna wrote the score; Maya produced still and moving images. It premiered in Philadelphia in March, and a tour will launch in Durham next year.

"Working with people you love can be challenging," Maya says. "But because we respect each other's art to reach, it ended up being beautiful." - *M.D.* ▶

... Durham Magazine ...

[http://www.talentmonthly.com/012015\\_Nnenna\\_Freelon#/012015\\_Nnenna\\_Freelon/](http://www.talentmonthly.com/012015_Nnenna_Freelon#/012015_Nnenna_Freelon/)

## **NNENNA FREELON: JAZZ SINGER, COMPOSER AND CREATOR OF THE CLOTHESLINE MUSE**



Nnenna Freelon is one of the great Jazz singers and composers of this generation. She has been nominated for six Grammy awards and has performed with some of the greatest artists in the country, including Ray Charles, Ellis Marsalis, Al Jarreau, Anita Baker, and Aretha Franklin. Currently, she has written, directed and produced a new theatrical production, *THE CLOTHESLINE MUSE*, a multi-discipline project that explores the clothesline as a metaphor of our community and family lifeline and its ties to our environment.

### **What are you currently working on?**

My current album is actually a theatrical play. For years I've wanted to sing in a musical on Broadway. I auditioned for *AIDA* and *THE COLOR PURPLE* and got callbacks. They would say, "You're too old," or "You don't have the right body type," or whatever. It occurred to me that I might need to write the piece that I star in. That seems like a hard way to go about it, but that's where I find myself right now. I've written a piece called *THE CLOTHESLINE MUSE*. I play the role of an 80 year old woman who wants to bequeath to her daughter this wonderful legacy of clothes-washing that she has built up during her years. Her granddaughter lives in New York City, is a screenwriter, and has absolutely zero interest in washing clothes or any of that stuff from the old 20th century life of her grandmother. The grandmother, in all her wisdom, has a story attached to every single article of clothing in this basket that she wants to give to her granddaughter. The byline of this play is "Before we were online, there was the clothesline." It's an inter-generational conversation between a grandmother and her granddaughter, and there's tension around what you keep and what you throw away. What do you value from the past, and what is necessary to move forward? There's a lot of love in this play, as well as a lot of humor. "I wrote the music and co-produced along with my daughter Maya, who also does the set design. Her mother-in-law Corinna Welsh is our choreographer. It's a real family affair, and it's more work than I've ever engaged in in my entire life. It is awe-inspiring and wonderful, I'm very excited! We're beginning our first tour in January. We'll be in West Palm Beach, St. Louis, Texas, Ohio and North Carolina."



[http://www.news-record.com/go\\_triad/memories-of-women-s-work-are-recalled-through-song-dance/article\\_e09b4aa2-a1aa-11e4-8e47-17ba9a5ab155.html](http://www.news-record.com/go_triad/memories-of-women-s-work-are-recalled-through-song-dance/article_e09b4aa2-a1aa-11e4-8e47-17ba9a5ab155.html)

January 22, 2015

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

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 Kariamou Welsh, 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 Kariamou 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.

<http://www.heraldsun.com/lifestyles/entertainment/x1866991426/Stories-that-have-not-been-told>

Nov. 18, 2013

## ***Stories that have not been told***

Audience to get preview of 'The Clothesline Muse'



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 Kariamu Welsh, 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?”



<http://www.hpenews.com/life/features/x1351411372/-The-Clothesline-Muse-story-told-through-music-dance-visual-art>

Jan 23, 2015

## *'The Clothesline Muse' story told through music, dance, visual art*

HIGH POINT — Three exceptionally creative women — six-time Grammy©-nominated jazz vocalist Nnenna Freelon, choreographer and scholar Dr. Kariamu Welsh, and acclaimed visual artist Maya Freelon Asante — explore the culture of women's work centered on the clothesline and doing the laundry.

"The Clothesline Muse" is a blend of music and history, dance and self-discovery, art and motherly wit. A single live performance will take place at the High Point Theatre at 7:30 p.m. Thursday, Jan. 29.

"The Clothesline Muse" centers around two main characters — teenager Mary Mack Douglass and her grandmother Grandma Blu, The Clothesline Muse. Mary Mack has received a letter from her college-of-choice and is faced with the task of writing an essay to convince the school that she should receive much-needed financial aid.

Grandma Blu, a laundress by trade, leads her on a journey of self-discovery via storytelling and family lore. As she quickly learns through Grandma Blu, laundry isn't just about dirty shirts and socks; it's about coming clean on what we stand for and believe in.

A multi-discipline theater project, the story of "The Clothesline Muse" is stunningly brought to life as visual artist Maya Freelon Asante's colorful tissue paper art is hung on the clothesline, alluding to laundry drying in the sun. Kariamu Welsh's choreographed movements for the six dancers are inspired by hand washing, drying, folding and ironing. Composer Nnenna Freelon, inspired by the soundscape of washing clothes in an outdoor environment, "hangs" songs and stories of hope, loss and celebration out on the line for all to see.

Critically acclaimed actress-producer-director-teaching artist Serena Ebhardt serves as the production's director.

"The Clothesline Muse" is a National Performance Network (NPN) Creation Fund Project co-commissioned by Painted Bride Art Center partnership with St. Joseph's Historic Foundation, Inc./Hayti Heritage Center and NPN. The Creation Fund is supported by the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation, Ford Foundation, and the National Endowment for the Arts (a federal agency). For more information: [www.npnweb.org](http://www.npnweb.org).

"The stirring message of The Clothesline Muse will guarantee a deeper appreciation of the contributions of women who became domestic workers in order to make a living, providing a better quality of life for themselves and their families," says High Point Theatre Executive Director David Briggs. "The fusion of art, dance and music to compliment the story is an experience not to be missed." Tickets, \$25 to \$30, are available online at [www.highpointtheatre.com](http://www.highpointtheatre.com) or through the box office by calling 887-3001. High Point Theatre is located at 220 E. Commerce Ave.

'Clothesline Muse' honors African-American women who lifted their families from poverty by taking in the wash.

Three exceptionally creative women - six-time Grammy©-nominated jazz vocalist Nnenna Freelon, choreographer/scholar Dr. Kariamu Welsh, and acclaimed visual artist Maya Freelon Asante - explore the culture of women's work centered on the clothesline and doing the laundry. The Clothesline Muse is a blend of music and history, dance and self-discovery, art and motherly wit. A single live performance will take place at the High Point Theatre on Thursday, January 29, at 7:30 PM.



THE INTERNATIONAL REVIEW OF AFRICAN AMERICAN ART PLUS  
EXTENDING THE COVERAGE OF THE PRINT JOURNAL

# International Review of African American Art

<http://iraaa.museum.hamptonu.edu/page/Innovating-Art-Creation-and-Capitalization>

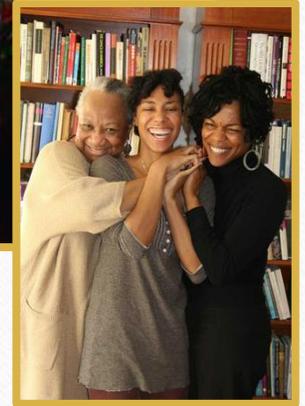
## ***Innovating Art Creation and Capitalization*** March 24, 2014

When Maya Freelon Asante found moisture-stained tissue paper in her grandmother's basement, she didn't see damaged goods. She saw an artistic medium instead: tissue ink monoprints and 3-D pieces. She has worked the medium into large installations that have covered museum walls and now she is continuing her exploration with a new project that incorporates the tissue paper art into a theatrical production.

Imagine a multimedia event unlike anything you've ever seen. Envision jazz vocals, lush tissue paper art, dance and the spoken word combined in an evening-length show. Picture a clothesline upon which colorful art is pinned to illustrate the points of a storytelling narrative. That thought you have constructed in your mind's eye is [The Clothesline Muse](#), a creative project conceived by jazz singer [Nnenna Freelon](#), choreographer [Kariam Welsh](#) and visual artist [Maya Freelon Asante](#). The three women, each distinguished in her own right in her respective discipline, plan to bring their concept to life in 2013. The premier of *The Clothesline Muse* will be at [The Painted Bride Art Center](#) in Philadelphia. The artistic trio has also secured venues in Baltimore and Durham, North Carolina, and hope to tour their production around the world.

"The clothesline is a deep and wide metaphor for the ties that bind us, for the work of our mothers and grandmothers and what they sacrificed for us to have a better future," says Maya Freelon Asante. The clothesline is also a metaphor for games young girls historically would play after the washing had been done, taking down the clothesline for duty as a skip rope in the double dutch or hand-clap game. "It also leads us to the future. If you think about saving the Earth, if you think about natural ways to save energy and ways to be green, then we're right back where we started with the clothesline as well. So there are multiple metaphors what will be used."

Tissue paper art created by Asante will be suspended on the clothesline. Video will be projected on these hangings. Large-scale tissue quilts will be set in motion, moving almost as dancers would. "It's going to be really exciting, unlike anything you've seen on stage so far because of all of the elements we're bringing," says Asante. "There's going to be live music, spoken word. We have the dancers, and Nnenna Freelon, my mom, is the Clothesline Muse character. She actually weaves us through the story. She's the one who pins the story on the line, and the dancers learn from her."



### **THREE ARTISTS**

"This is the culmination of three visionary artists' careers in a sense. Having these three minds come together so creatively -- and also we each bring something different to the table -- I can't really say there has been a precedent for this type of performance," says Asante. "But there has been a performance called *The Blueprint of a Lady* Billie Holiday tribute, which my mom was the lead for and she co-wrote with Ron Brown and his dance group. It also had live jazz, dance and live music on stage. This is different. We're taking it to another level with this project."

# thINKingDANCE

Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation

<http://thinkingdance.net/articles/2014/03/21/It-All-Comes-Out-in-the-Wash>

March 21, 2014

## *It All Comes Out in the Wash*

*The Clothesline Muse*, an evening-length work, 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. Kariamua Welsh conceived the multi-media work with written collaboration by Maya Freelon Asante (Welsh's daughter-in-law) and Nnenna Freelon (Freelon Asante's mother). Additionally, Welsh supplied the choreography, Freelon the music and musical direction, and Freelon Asante the set and projection design.

The tight direction by Serena Ehardt gives consistent momentum to *The Clothesline Muse's* narrative. The two central characters are a teenager; Mary Mack Douglass, performed with exuberance by Baset Sat-Ra, and her grandmother, Grandma Blu/The Clothesline Muse, inspiringly played by Nnenna Freelon. In this story, Mary Mack Douglass has just received a letter from her college-of-choice and is now tasked with the dubious challenge of writing an essay to convince the school that she should receive much-needed financial aid. Grandma Blu, a laundress by trade and griot by rights, gives Mary Mack pithy grist for her essay (and for life) by leading her on a journey of self-discovery via storytelling and family lore.

In this fable, the clothesline is not just a place where clothes are hung to dry but where the important stuff of life happens. And as we learn through Grandma Blu, laundry isn't just about dirty shirts and socks; it's about coming clean on what we stand for and believe in. *The Clothesline Muse* is a work so densely rich with metaphor, symbolism and reference to the African diaspora that I, a white woman from the suburbs of Seattle, likely missed much of it. But no matter; the universality of the message was crystal clear: we are all connected by the actions of our ancestors, whose humble beginnings can yield rich rewards to future generations.

The set design by Maya Freelon Asante features her signature tissue paper/fabric artwork. The colorful swaths that draped the back wall of the stage created a stunning image that harmonized handily with the laundry theme. Her projection design, in collaboration with Chris Charles, flowed with archival images depicting African Americans and financial ledgers that gave the work historical heft. Welsh's choreography brought kinetic dimension for a chorus of six white-clad women (Shaness Kemp, Adrienne Abdus-Salaam, Jessica Featherson, Stephanie Padilla, Sakarah Hall-Edge and Leila Anglin) whose movements in one section evoked the fluttering of laundry drying on the line. In another, the chorus employed a lively hand clapping game in a rollicking one-upmanship challenge. Grandma Blu recalled her experiences of lovemaking, which were humorously enacted by Kemp ironing a white shirt. Who knew sex could be described in the details of proper shirt ironing? Steam was in plentiful supply. Freelon sings the African American spiritual, *There is a Balm in Gilead*. It is a song that asks for healing and grace and Freelon soars with it; her powerful presence anchors the show. In her fantasy talk show, "What's On Your Line?...it all comes out in the wash," Freelon as Blu supports, admonishes and guides her guests to spiritual wholeness by leading them to the righteous path found in good laundry practices. If you put your expensive wool sweater in hot water, then you need to pay closer attention to care instructions. If you stole a designer shirt from your neighbor's hanging laundry, you have most definitely...crossed the line.

Appearing many times throughout the work is a woman who wears a long touring coat (circa 1900?). She carries a bundle atop her head and glides ghost-like through various scenes. Towards the end of the piece, Grandma Blu follows her from the stage in a solemn processional. Mary Mack is left to pick up the symbolic line: which she does with love, clarity and understanding. *The Clothesline Muse* is a fully realized work that I found deeply gratifying. The line, in the end, connected and closed, forming a perfect circle.

*The Clothesline Muse*, a collaboration between Kariamua Welsh, Nnenna Freelon and Maya Freelon Asante, The Painted Bride Art Center, March 14-16, 2014.



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