



The Ntozake Shange Official Biography

Ntozake Shange is recognized as one of America's greatest writers in the genres of poetry, drama, fiction and memoir. She achieved iconic status as a primary voice of women and persons of color.

Shange was born Paulette Linda Williams on October 18, 1948. In 1971, to show her pride in her African heritage, she changed her name to Ntozake Shange, derived from the Xhosa and Zulu languages, meaning respectively, "*she who carries her own things*" and "*she who walks like a lion*".

Shange was raised in Trenton, NJ and in St. Louis, MO. Her father, Paul T. Williams, M.D., was a general surgeon and her mother, Eloise Owens Williams, was a clinical social worker and college professor at then Trenton State College (now known as The College of New Jersey). Shange, the first born, had three siblings, sisters Ifa Bayeza and Bisa Williams, and brother, Paul T. Williams, Jr. After her father completed his surgical residency at Homer G. Phillips Hospital in St. Louis, the family returned to New Jersey and settled in Lawrenceville. Shange graduated from Trenton High School and subsequently graduated from Barnard College in New York City and received a Master of Arts in American Studies from the University of Southern California.

Shange was affected deeply by the Civil Rights Movement, including her experience as one of a few Black students to integrate public schools in St. Louis. Later, while at Barnard in the late 1960's, she was influenced by a wide variety of political movements, viewed as "radical", including the Black power movement, anti-Vietnam War protests, the feminist movement, the Black arts and African liberation movements, the Puerto Rican liberation movement and the Sixties sexual revolution.

She became a part of and a voice for these social movements; she embodied the ongoing struggle of Black women to attain equality, dignity and respect in all aspects of society. The Ntozake Shange Archive at Barnard, a 60-linear foot collection of Shange's journals, correspondence and personal effects established in 2016 allows scholars and students to study her legacy and work.

Shange's theater piece *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf* (termed by Shange a "choreopoem" for its highly original combination of music, poetry and dance and added to the American lexicon of literary genres) was a stunning success on Broadway in 1976-1977. Considered a landmark not just in American theatre but also in theater worldwide, it won an Obie award while still off-Broadway at the Public Theater. The first Broadway production of *for colored girls*, which opened in Sept. 1976, holds the record as the longest-running straight play by an African American writer in Broadway history and stands as one of only two unquestioned Broadway hit productions by African American women in the history of the New York theater - the other being Lorraine Hansberry's "A Raisin in the Sun" from 1959. *for colored girls* has been performed continuously in productions throughout the United States and abroad and was made into a major motion picture by Tyler Perry in 2010.

Shange won a second Obie in 1981 for her adaptation of Bertolt Brecht's *Mother Courage and Her Children* at the Public Theater and she won a veritable mountain of other awards, including two Outer Critics Circle Awards, numerous AUDELCO awards, a Guggenheim fellowship, a National Endowment for the Arts fellowship, the Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund annual writer's award, the Los Angeles Times Book Prize for poetry, the Paul Robeson Achievement Award, the National Black Theatre Festival's Living Legend Award, a New Federal Theatre lifetime achievement award, and the Medal of Excellence from Columbia University. Shange was also nominated for Tony, Grammy and Emmy awards.

In her prolific career, Shange authored 15 plays, 20 poetry collections, 6 novels, 5 children's books, 3 collections of essays, and a partial memoir *Lost in Language & Sound*. Following her death, three additional books were published, *I Am An Old Woman* (2019), *Dance We Do: A Poet Explores Black Dance* (2020) and *Sing A Black Girl's Song* (2023), a collection of her unpublished works. *Wild Beauty*, a collection of new and selected poems by Shange and published the year before her death, has the distinction of being the first bilingual (English & Spanish) poetry collection ever published by Simon & Schuster.

Among her notable novels are *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo* (a story of three sisters out of Charleston, South Carolina); *Betsey Brown* (centered on her childhood and the Civil Rights movement in St. Louis), *Liliane*:

Resurrection of the Daughter (a highly innovative work incorporating the methods of psychoanalysis in a semi-autobiographical novel) and the epic novel, *Some Sing Some Cry*, co-written with her sister, Ifa Bayeza, which chronicles the history and influence of African American music through women in successive generations of a family from enslavement to the dawn of the 21st century.

Other notable plays by Shange are *A Photograph: Lovers in Motion*; *Spell # 7*; and *From Okra to Greens*. She also collaborated with some of the most notable Black photographers of her era in the highly praised photo/poetry collection, *The Sweet Breath of Life*.

Shange earned her master's degree in American Studies in 1973 from the University of Southern California in Los Angeles, California. Throughout her career, she taught at major American universities including Rice University, Villanova University, DePaul University and the University of Florida. She lectured extensively at universities and colleges, including Yale, Howard, New York University, Mills College, the California State Colleges and City College of New York.

Shange also traveled the world, including a tour in South Africa with the renowned choral group Ladysmith Black Mambazo. Her travels also had a political bent, taking her to revolutionary hot spots in the Caribbean, Cuba, Angola and Nicaragua, where she met and was welcomed by progressive and populist leaders.

From childhood on, she was influenced and privileged to meet and know many of the era's greatest writers and artists of color, including as W.E.B. Du Bois, Romare Bearden, Miles Davis, Chico Hamilton, Dizzy Gillespie, Amiri Baraka, Maya Angelou and Toni Morrison among many others.

Shange's primary voice was as a spoken word poet. Much of her work, even her prose, was meant to be performed onstage - as part and parcel of modern jazz, especially what is called "free jazz", the type of jazz Shange came of age with. She performed with many of the jazz greats of her time, including Sun Ra, Ornette Coleman, Archie Shepp, David Murray, Hamiet Bluiett and many more. Trained in violin, she was often considered a musician by her fellow performers. Trained also as a dancer, Shange performed in many professional dance performances, including a stint in the first Broadway production of *for colored girls*. In collaboration with choreographer Dianne McIntyre, Shange presented new combinations of dance and poetry at such venues as Barnard College and Oberlin College later in her life. She also worked as a director, including at the Public Theater and the Ensemble Theatre in Houston.

Shange presented plays or otherwise collaborated with almost every major Black theater company in the country, including the Lorraine Hansberry Theatre in San Francisco, the Freedom Theatre in Philadelphia and Crossroads Theatre Company in New Brunswick, New Jersey. This work included Shange's choreoessay *Lost in Language & Sound*, a poetic panorama of her life presented within a one-hour musical and choreographic drama at Nuyorican Poets Café in New York City and in workshop performances at the Karamu House in Cleveland.

Shange's revision of her choreopoem *A Photograph - Lovers in Motion*—as re-imagined in collaboration with her sister, author and playwright Ifa Bayeza, enjoyed a critically-acclaimed revival Off-Broadway at New York's Negro Ensemble Company in 2020.

The 2019 revival of *for colored girls* by the NY Shakespeare Festival/Public Theater garnered nominations for four Lucille Lortel Awards - winning two; five Antony Awards; the 2020 Outer Critic's Circle Award and a 2020 Drama Desk Award. The 2021 Broadway revival of *for colored girls* garnered seven Tony nominations.

In recognition of her contributions, Shange received many honors including the City University of New York Langston Hughes Medal for Literature in 2017, the Poetry Society of America Percy Bush Shelley Award laureate for 2018 and the Hurston/Wright Foundation's 2018 Legacy Award for Literature. Posthumously, Shange was inducted into the New York State Writers Hall of Fame and the Off-Broadway Alliance Hall of Fame.

In addition to her two sisters and brother, Shange is survived by her daughter, Savannah Shange and granddaughter, Harriet Shange Watkins, along with a host of extended family.

Ntozake Shange passed away on October 27, 2018.

Paul T. Williams, Jr.

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