

Zora

Zora Neale Hurston was a folklorist and anthropologist, but she is best known as a novelist who had a spectacular ability to create the kinds of people, places and situations that enthralled readers. Ironically, her roller-coaster life was even stranger than fiction.

In the one-woman "Zora," actress Kim Brockington explores this complex woman, while taking audiences through the many peaks and valleys she experienced in her life.

Hurston - along with people like Langston Hughes and Wallace Thurman - was in the Niggerati, a group of talented, young black writers who defined the Harlem Renaissance of the '20s and '30s. She arrived in Harlem after attending Howard University - where she started the school's newspaper, The Hilltop - and graduating from Barnard College, where she was the only black student.

Hurston, who briefly taught at N.C. Central University, began gaining attention for her short stories and essays while she was still a student. She published her seminal work, "Their Eyes Were Watching God," in 1937, and continued to write short stories and even journalistic investigative pieces for newspapers throughout the 1950s.

Hurston had no fairy-tale life. Their were brief marriages; criticism from blacks who frowned upon the inarticulate language that the characters in her books and stories spoke; and even allegations in 1948 that she sexually molested a 10-year-old boy (allegations that were later discredited when Hurston proved she was out



Kim Brockington

of the country at the time the alleged crime was said to have taken place).

Hurston died penniless in a public welfare home in 1960 at age 69; she was buried in an unmarked grave. In the 1970s, writer Alice Walker discovered Hurston's grave and purchased a marker for it.

Brockington was attracted to Hurston's life immediately. On stage, she portrays the writers' wit, style and intellect. And even when Hurston's road got rocky, through Brockington's strong acting abilities, audiences see how Hurston's faith and determination helped her overcome obstacles. John Flautz, a reviewer for the Allentown, Penn.-based Morning Call newspaper, said after seeing the play that "Kim Brockington pours fire into the portrait of the queen on the Harlem Renaissance." Others have praised the show for its promotion of literature and writing among theatergoers.

The showbiz trifecta has embraced Baltimore native Brockington. Her credits include stage, television and film. She is best-known for her work on the daytime dramas "Guiding Light," on which she played Felicia Boudreaux for seven years, and "All My Children." Brockington received lots of national attention last year she portrayed Hurston in a PBS documentary about the writer. She made appearances on the big screen in films like "School of Rock" and "Dirty Laundry," but the stage has been where she has shined brightest. Her theater credits include "From the Mississippi Delta," "Doubt" and "Letters From a New England Negro," which she previously brought to the National Black Theatre Festival.

"Zora" has been adapted from a theatrical biography by writer Laurence Holder. The NBTF shows will be directed by Jerome Preston Bates.



Lena Baker



Vanessa Adams-Harris

Who Will Sing for Lena?

The compelling story of Lena Baker has been buried by time. She worked as a domestic in rural Georgia years before the Civil Rights Movement came to fruition. A pleasant woman by all accounts, Baker shot and killed her white male employer, Ernest Knight, in 1944 and was quickly hauled off to jail, tried, convicted and sentenced to death.

The racist legal justice system would hear nothing of her defense. It was well-known that Baker and Knight were lovers.

Everyone also knew that Knight was not a very nice man. Baker claimed he threatened her with the gun after she told him of her plan to leave him. The gun accidentally went off in the ensuing struggle, Baker maintained.

Baker was electrocuted for the crime, becoming Georgia's first and only woman to die in such a manner.

Baker's story is compelling to actress Vanessa Adams-Harris. She has won wide acclaim for her performance in "Who Will Sing for Lena?," a one-woman show about Baker's short life.

Adams-Harris says that one of her main motivations in playing Baker is to bring this obscure story to light.

"They just wanted to push this woman out there and act like she never existed. For 60 years, that was the case,"

Adams-Harris told the Tulsa (Okla.) World.

"Who Will Sing for Lena?" was penned by Clark Atlanta Professor Dr. Janice L. Liddell six years ago. Even an esteemed educator like Liddell had no idea about Baker's story until she stumbled upon a newspaper article about her.

Some of the dialogue in Liddell's script is taken directly from the transcripts of Baker's one-day trial, which had a jury of all white men.

In the trial transcripts, Baker testified that her employer, E.B. Knight, held her against her will in a grist mill and threatened to shoot her if she tried to escape. She testified she grabbed his gun and shot him when he tried to hit her with a metal bar.

Some of the dialogue in Liddell's play was taken directly from the transcript. Liddell said she used artistic license to fill in the blanks.

"Because I knew her story and I believed her story, I was able to fill in a lot of the gaps - who and what she was before she worked for Mr. Knight," Liddell told the Tulsa World.

In 2005, the state of Georgia pardoned Baker, 60 years after her death. Members of the Georgia legislature have seen "Who Will Sing for Lena?," but Liddell said she doesn't know if her play contributed to Baker's parole.

Adams-Harris is a veteran Oklahoma-based actress and model, whose stage credits include "Joe Turner's Come and Gone," "For Colored Girls ..." and "Having Our Say - The Delaney Sisters' First 100 Years." In 2005, she took home the Jingle Feldman Award by the Arts and Humanities Council of Tulsa for her one-woman show, "Rosa Parks - My Story."

Aug. 6 at
8 p.m.
Aug. 7 at 3 p.m.
Aug. 8 at 3 & 8 p.m.
at Reynolda House

Ticket Price: \$40

INCLUDES BOTH SHOWS