

## Letters from Zora: In Her Own Words



Vanessa Bell Calloway on stage as Zora Neale Hurston.

One of this year's most eagerly anticipated celebrity shows is "Letters from Zora: In Her Own Words," in which show-business veteran Vanessa Bell Calloway plays the acclaimed writer Zora Neale Hurston.

Calloway, known for her roles in films like "Coming to America," "What's Love Got to Do With It" and "Crimson Tide," is a frequent NBTf guest and performer, but in her previous festival productions, she has acted as part of ensembles. "Zora" is all Calloway, and she shines brightly, just as her many fans would expect her to.

The woman behind the prose comes to life through Calloway's performance. We see that even at her artistic height, Hurston was still haunted by self-doubt and far from immune from criticisms leveled at her by famous colleagues like Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison. The First Lady of the Harlem Renaissance, Hurston penned four novels and numerous essays, plays and short stories. Her seminal work, "Their Eyes Were Watching God," has been named one of the 100 best English-language novels of all time.

Hurston was as fiery and controversial as she was talented. She was criticized for being a vocal opponent of integration; had failed marriages (including one that lasted just seven months); and had rifts with famous friends like Langston Hughes. But her lowest point came in 1948, when she was falsely accused of molesting a 10-year-old boy. The accusation had a devastating effect on her career. She died penniless in a Florida welfare home.

Writer Gabrielle Denise Pina stumbled across actual letters written by Hurston while touring the California African American Museum, and she was immediately rapt.

"I literally became lost in her prose, her life and her grasp of the African-American

heart," Pina said. "The result is a spirited play in two acts that consists of authentic letters from Zora Neale Hurston fused with fictional narrative intended to illuminate her life, her extraordinary career and her contributions to the American literary canon. Ms. Hurston's life in and of itself was a musical soundtrack."

Calloway, who recently won an NAACP Theatre Award for the role, said she was drawn to the part by Hurston's strength and the way she marched to the beat of her own drummer.

"What is special about Zora Neale Hurston is she chose to live life on her own terms," Calloway said. "She chose to be her own woman in a time when women were supposed to dress a certain way... act a certain way. She did her own thing. She was a renaissance woman."

Anita Dashiell-Sparks directs, and Dr. Ronald McCurdy serves as music director and composer. "Letters from Zora: In Her Own Words," which is being presented by Los Angeles-based OPAS, has virtually sold out every venue where it has been staged since its 2012 debut – from the Pasadena (Calif.) Playhouse to the Crossroads Theater (in New Jersey) and the (Washington) DC Black Theatre Festival.

*New Brunswick Today's* M. Lennon Perricone's summed up the sentiments of most critics who have reviewed the play when he wrote, "Letters from Zora: In Her Own Words' is a witty, lyrical and clever monologue that has much to say, and says it wonderfully." ■



Gabrielle Denise Pina

### Letters from Zora: In Her Own Words

SECCA -  
McChesney Scott  
Dunn Auditorium

Tues, Aug. 4 3 p.m.

Tues, Aug. 4 8 p.m.

Wed, Aug. 5 3 p.m.

Wed, Aug. 5 8 p.m.

**\$43**