

The doll plays, by Alva Rogers
Marketing/ Production History



The Brown Creative Writing Program
is pleased to invite you to

the doll plays
by Alva Rogers

A fully staged reading
of her 1998 MFA Thesis

24-26 April
8:00 p.m.

Russell Lab
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5 Young Orchard



BROWN UNIVERSITY: AUNT LEN CARING FOR HER LIMESTONE HOME AND MUSEUM







We can keep her forever in yesterdays, in yesterday, in our doll world, we can keep her forever...

NEW WORLD THEATER AMHERST, MA

New World Theater production at the University of Massachusetts
Amherst cast and crew with Holly Laws, puppet, doll and set builder;
Heather Henson designer, co-director and set builder;
Alva Rogers, playwright and co-director 1998

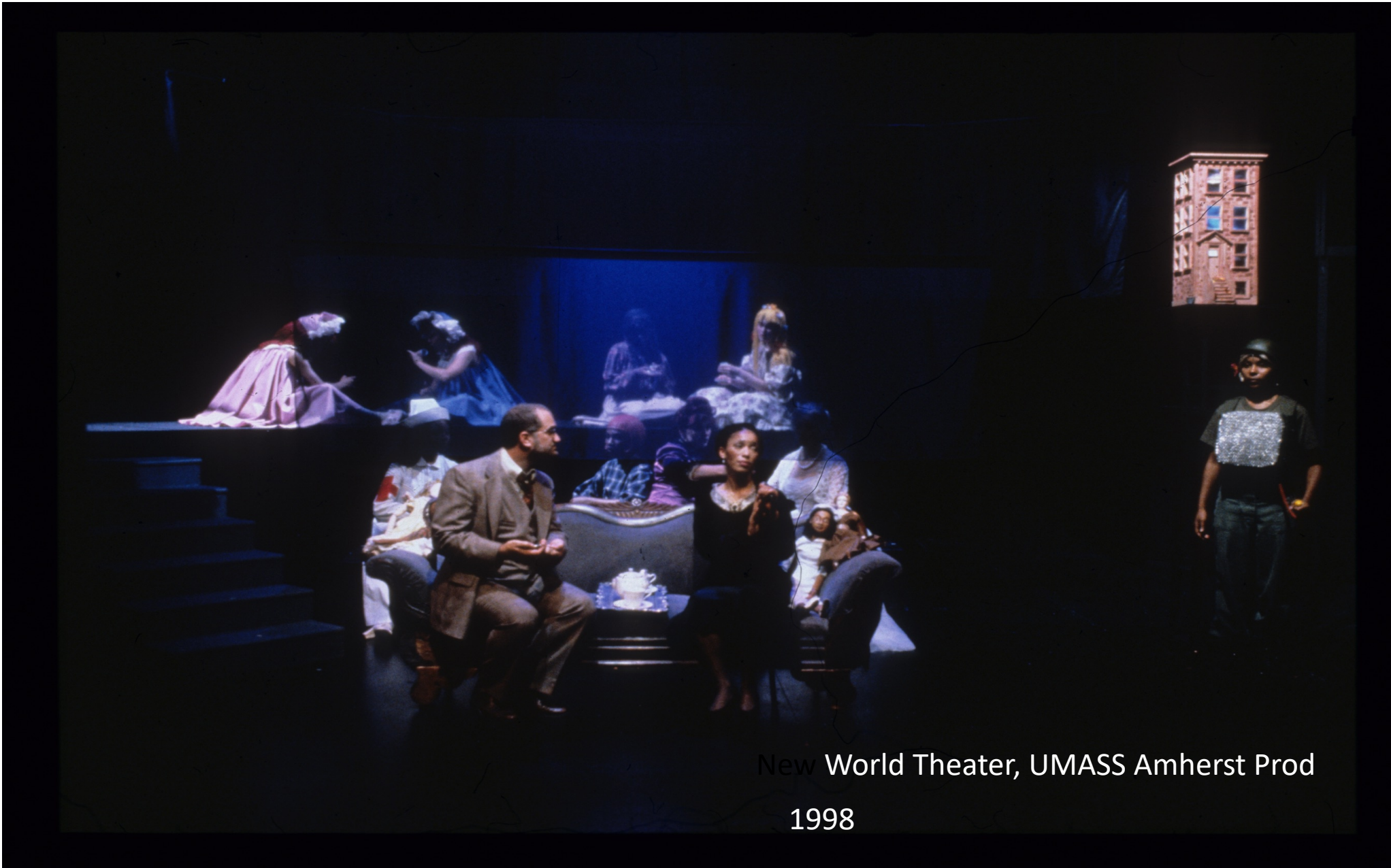




New World Theater

The Doll Collector, Aunt Len, Army Talking Doll and Doll Ensemble

“Sell your
Collection
To me, Au



New World Theater, UMASS Amherst Prod

1998

French Fashion Doll, Aunt Len and cast in *For Joy and Beauty*: New World Theater





Actor's Express Theater Production in Atlanta 2002

Pictured: Cast and playwright



Harlem is in Vogue

Grace
Kelly Doll

French
Fashion
Doll

Actors
Express
Theater



JOSEPH PAPP PUBLIC THEATER, NEW YORK, NY
FESTIVAL OF NEW PLAYS: STAGED READING



Reading at the Public Theater NYC 2000 – partial cast with Peter DuBois director, and Alva Rogers, playwright

CLASSICAL THEATER OF HARLEM IN RESIDENCE AT SCHOMBERG RESEARCH LIBRARY

STAGED READING

Classical
Theater in
Harlem:
Reading at The
Schomburg
Research
Library



American Master
Armen de Lavallade

As Aunt Len
Cira 2003-2009

Playwright
and cast of the doll plays

living dolls

THEATER

Express lays down challenge with rep of hallucinatory, human dramas

By WENDELL BROCK / wbrock@ajc.com

As a 94-year-old woman lies dying in a Harlem toy museum, the dolls she has nurtured like children for a quarter-century spring to life. They have come to put her to bed, to escort her to another world, to act out the seminal events of her life, which are now dancing before her eyes.

Such is the premise of Alva Rogers' "The Doll Plays," which receives its world premiere this weekend at Actor's Express. Based on the true story of Aunt Len's Doll and Toy Museum, run by retired schoolteacher Lenon Hoyte in her Harlem home from 1970 to 1994, Rogers' play unfolds in a hallucinatory sequence in which more than a dozen actors — attired in fantastical doll costumes — minister to the expiring Aunt Len (played by Carol Mitchell Leon).

Rogers' unusual drama is being shown in repertory with Thomas Gibbons' "Bee-luther-hatchee," a straightforward (and fictitious) narrative about an African-American editor who publishes an unsolicited autobiography, then goes on to unravel the mystery behind it.

The two productions, so stylistically opposite yet so thematically similar, use identical cast

and design teams but different directors. Peter DuBois, artistic director of Alaska's Perseverance Theater, will stage "The Doll Plays," while Philadelphia director K. Elizabeth Stevens, who was responsible for last season's "Loot," will mount "Bee-luther-hatchee."

In this unique and ambitious project, Actor's Express artistic director Wier Harman hopes to create a sort of point-counterpoint dialogue for Atlanta's diverse and adventurous theatergoing community.

As the producer of Suzan-Lori Parks' "The America Play" and Maria Irene Fornes' "Fefu and Her Friends" last season, Harman knows that such experimental work can be a slippery slope (quite literally in this case, since the recent snowy weather delayed previews).

> See PERSONAL, P2

THEATER PREVIEW

"The Doll Plays"
"Bee-luther-hatchee"

"The Doll Plays" previews at 2 p.m. Saturday; opens at 7 p.m. Sunday.
"Bee-luther-hatchee" previews at 8 p.m. Saturday; opens at 2 p.m. Sunday. In repertory through March 16. 8 p.m. Thursdays-Saturdays; 5 p.m. Sundays; 2 p.m. Feb. 3 and March 10. \$20-\$25. Actor's Express at King Plow Arts Center, 887 W. Marietta St. N.W. 404-607-7469, www.actorsexpress.com.



The Grace Kelly doll (Lane Carlock) is dressed by Atlanta Opera costumer Joanna Schimink.

NEWS UPDATES DAILY AT AJC.COM



LAURA NOEL / Staff

Aunt Len (Carol Mitchell Leon, right) and Brown Nurse Doll (Michele McCullough) are part of the collection of dolls belonging to a dying 94-year-old woman in "The Doll Plays" at Actor's Express.

Personal histories universally revealing

> Continued from P1

"People were really thrown for a loop by 'The America Play,'" Harman says. "For good reason. It's a very weird play. But the audience kept wanting me to tell them what it all meant. And by running two plays at the same time, using the same cast, I hope to (A) make people feel more comfortable with unfamiliar theatrical forms and (B) send them the message: Don't look for me to give you an 'equals sign' at the end of the night that tells you what you saw. Trust your own experience. Trust your own heart. You tell me what you thought, and you tell me if it worked for you."

To be sure, one could probably use a guide to "The Doll Plays," which seems to combine elements of Alice in Wonderland and Katherine Anne Porter's *Granny Weatherall*.

Rogers — a remarkably versatile artist who has enjoyed a career as a cabaret singer, film actress ("Daughters of the Dust," "School Daze") and now playwright — says she wrote the play in verse because she wanted the dolls to speak in a distinctive style. She cites Spanish dramatist Federico Garcia Lorca, filmmaker Jan Svankmajer, the surrealist painters and Southern writers Flannery O'Connor and Eudora Welty as influences.

In previous incarnations, the piece has used shadow puppets created by MacArthur Foundation "genius" grant winner Kara Walker, a former Atlantan. It has been workshoped by Heather Henson (daughter of the late puppeteer Jim and a friend of Rogers'). But the Actor's Express staging marks Rogers' first full-scale production by a professional company.

"This is kind of like a homecoming in a way," says Rogers, who was last in Atlanta in 1986 for the filming of Spike Lee's "School Daze." She says it's ironic that both her acting and playwrighting careers are being launched in this city.

DuBois, who met Rogers in graduate school at Brown University and directed the staged reading of "The Doll Plays" at New York's Public Theater last year, believes that she is on the cusp of a brilliant career.

"I find her verse actually similar to Shakespeare," he says. "You have to pay as much attention to the form as the content. There's a very distinct structure and music that you find in Shakespeare that you need to expand and seek out. This is what's interesting about this play, what takes place in this moment between life



LAURA NOEL / Staff

Peter DuBois, director of "The Doll Plays," and Wier Harman, director of Actor's Express, joke that they were separated at birth.

and death... Aunt Len's life is flashed before her eyes... and the dolls kind of lead her through these memories in the moment before her death."

Hoyte's home once housed 6,000 dolls. In 1990, the museum was vandalized. The collection was dismantled after she could no longer care for it; in 1994, 700 of the best examples were auctioned by Sotheby's. Hoyte died in 1999 at age 94.

After a trip to the Harlem house in 1981, New York Times columnist Anna Quindlen wrote: "There are enormous baby dolls with round doughy faces and elaborate christening gowns, 7-year-old-girl dolls in velvet coats and Mary Jane shoes, a Grace Kelly doll with a beautiful bisque face so real that she positively cries out for a Prince Rainier doll, an Elizabeth II doll with an impossibly tiny plastic nose, Shirley Temple dolls, Betty Boop dolls, white dolls, black dolls from all nations."

The collection once contained a pair of papier-mâché dolls by Leo Moss, a black handyman who lived in Atlanta in the 19th century. The dolls, Leo and Lillian, had tears running down their cheeks. As the story goes, after being parted from his wife and children, Moss became so sad that he only made crying dolls.

Rogers, who visited Hoyte's museum several times during the mid-'80s, says she wasn't able to work Moss' dolls into her script. But there is a Black Baby Doll (Joniece Abbott-Pratt), a White Baby Doll (Kelly Albano), a Grace Kelly doll (Lane Carlock) and an antebellum tableau

involving a white Missus (Stacy Melich) and a slave (Ali Vaughn). The elaborate garments are by Joanna Schimink, who does costumes for the Atlanta Opera.

Harman and Rogers see the play as a way of documenting an important story, and a cultural legacy, that has become something of a historical footnote. "I always want people to know what happens when a society or city fails its culture," says Rogers, a diminutive woman who speaks in a voice that sounds as fragile as bisque. "I feel like society kind of failed Aunt Len, and it kind of failed us."

As a bookend to "The Doll Plays," "Bee-luther-hatchee" explores a similar theme: unearthing an important personal history that otherwise would have been forgotten. In Gibbons' play, book editor Shelita Burns (Donna Bisce) publishes a manuscript believed to be the autobiography of Libby Price, a reclusive woman who lived in the segregated South (played by Mitchell Leon). When the author's identity is revealed, the editor is outraged, and a hotly charged debate ensues.

Both dramas have a canny way of illuminating the darker threads that have been discreetly woven into the larger canvas of race relations. In particular, Harman likens "The Doll Plays" to the silhouettes of visual artist Walker. "When you dig in really deep, you are like, 'That is twisted. That is sick.' In a way, 'The Doll Plays' functions on the same level. It will be very beautiful and very elegant and sort of sweet, but encoded in places will be these nasty little bits."

Creative Loafing review: the doll plays 2002

Toys in the attic

ACTOR'S EXPRESS REPERTORY PLAYS
EXPLORE RACE AND REPRESENTATION

THEATER

BY CURT HOLMAN **YOU MIGHT SAY** there's extra credit assigned to Actor's Express' latest pair of productions. Not only is the theater presenting Thomas Gibbons' *Bee-luther-hatchee* and the world premiere of Alva Rogers' *the doll plays* in repertory, but Actor's Express urges the audience to find common ground between the two plays, to consider how one might inform the other.

It's a bold approach for the playhouse to stage the two plays side-by-side with no literal connections and sharp contrasts in form and content. They do share similarities, though, including earthy, emotional performances from Carol Mitchell-Leon near the center of both works, as well as concerns over complex matters of race in both American history and the present day. Viewing both can be a test of patience, but a rewarding experience for thoughtful theater-goers.

Alva Rogers wrote *the doll plays* to pay tribute to a real woman named Lenon Hoyte, aka "Aunt Len" (Mitchell-Leon), who devoted her life to collecting thousands of rare dolls and maintaining a Harlem doll museum. The real Aunt Len died in 1999, and *the doll plays* imagines the elderly woman on her death bed, her life flashing before her eyes — only acted out by her dolls.

The play offers a sequence of vignettes, with some dolls telling Aunt Len's life story, others relating their history as toys and collectibles. A French dress-up doll (Anne Towns) recalls her past as a cast-off plaything, while a Grace Kelly doll (Lane Carlock) describes how the movie star had to abandon Hollywood for life as a princess.

Joanna Schmink's costumes prove amusingly appropriate (some have yarn for hair) and with about a dozen actresses made up and behaving as dolls, the show makes for technically impressive and highly precocious performances. The rag dolls flounce around as if boneless, while ones made of wood or hard plastic have a limited range of motion.



WHAT A DOLL: Carol Mitchell-Leon is a doll collector in *the doll plays*.



AUTHOR, AUTHOR: Donna Biscoe (left) and Stacy Metich in *Bee-luther-hatchee* at Actor's Express.

At times the dolls have tea parties or stand in as the class Aunt Len taught as a Harlem school teacher, at other times they panic when the museum gets burglarized. The play reruns scenes and speeches, employs shadow puppets and lets the narrator doll (Amanda Hou) continuously chirp "doll play" until the show makes you feel like you've gone temporarily insane. Or, more specifically, like you've taken some psychotropic drugs while watching "Antiques Roadshow."

But director Peter DuBois has a firm grasp on how much weirdness an audience can absorb. With its kaleidoscopic structure and poetic dialogue, *the doll plays* is by no means an "easy" text, yet Rogers' dream-logic holds together, and you comprehend the playwright's ideas and implications. Aunt Len comes across as rather delusional, but Mitchell-Leon helps you empathize with her attachment to her dolls as children and her despair at seeing her beloved Harlem deteriorate.

It's a relief that *Bee-luther-hatchee*, directed by K. Elizabeth Stevens, proves a more conventional drama. The protagonist is Shelita Burns (Donna Biscoe), who edits a line of reprinted "lost" African-American classics. Shelita has found a surprise best seller with the memoir *Bee-luther-hatchee* (an expression referring to the place you go "after hell"), and we get glimpses of the work in speeches by author Libby Price (Mitchell-Leon) describing her life in the Jim Crow South.

But despite being a successful, award-winning author, Libby remains an enigma, never photographed or interviewed, and even Shelita has never met her in person. Shelita dedicates herself to tracking Libby down, and after several blind alleys discovers in a Charlotte hotel room that the author is not at all whom she expected. The playwright provides a juicy mystery in the first act that sets up a provocative debate in the second, wrestling with such matters as authenticity, entitlement, fraud and "Why is the writer more important than the words?"

The production provides plenty of food for thought and gets vivid, credible work from its cast. Yet *Bee-luther-hatchee* feels somehow incomplete, like an auxiliary to

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ARTS

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**ARTS
AGENDA,**
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the doll plays rather than a show that stands on its own. The material is strongest as a debate in the manner of Bernard Shaw rather than a character-driven play, and the story ultimately feels more like an anecdote than a fully fleshed-out plot. The script gives the audience plenty to think about, but also seems to leave Shelita stranded, especially given the character's many motivations established in the first act: Some indication of the events' aftermath on the role may lend the show more weight.

Or it may simply be that this insubstantial sense comes from the blank blandness of the set, with its plain pink-white walls and minimal furnishings, like an abandoned day spa. Mitchell-Leon delivers some of Libby's speeches from the other side of a rectangular screen, a chintzy effect that suggests an imitation of videotape more than anything else.

Some of the most emotionally affecting moments of both plays address the racism

in America's past, shown in both Libby's flashbacks and the stories of several antebellum dolls, including Ali Vaughn's young slave, Early, and Marisa Cleghorn's equally young mistress, Sarah. The hundred strokes Early gives Sarah's hair foreshadows the hundred lashes the slave receives for uttering an unfortunate truth.

You can — and should — measure *the doll plays* and *Bee-luther-hatchee* by their unflinching considerations of race, but there's another dynamic going on in the Actor's Express repertory project. Both plays are dedicated to notions of representation, to artificial means of clinging to history and individuals who have died or disappeared. The past can be kept alive in dolls, in manuscripts — and in plays. Aunt Len and the personalities *in* the plays seem dedicated to the same kind of work as the authors of the plays, making the audience uniquely conscious of the texts and their presentation.

If you take up Actor's Express' challenge in seeing their plays, avoid the temptation of attending them back-to-back, as Rogers in particular needs time to sink in. *Bee-luther-hatchee* and *the doll plays* can be taxing shows, but ones with some uncanny perspectives on the imitation of life. ♦

curt.holman@creativeloafing.com

Bee-luther-hatchee and *the doll plays* play in repertory through March 16 at Actor's Express, King Plow Arts Center, 887 W. Marietta St., Thurs.-Sat. at 8 p.m. and Sun. at 5 p.m. (2 p.m. Jan. 23 and Feb. 7). \$20-\$25. 404-607-7469. www.actorexpress.com.

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The doll plays crib sheet: P. 2

Alva Rogers—Playwright

Alva Rogers has substantial credits as a performer as well as a playwright. She played the lead in Julie Dash's luminous film *Daughters of the Dust*, and she was featured in Spike Lee's *School Daze* and Shu Lea Cheang's *Fresh Kill*. She has written for and performed in projects at numerous New York venues including *The Kitchen*, Central Park's *SummerStage*, *P.S. 122*, and *Dixon Place*, and she received a 1995 New York Dance and Performance *Bessie Award* as a co-creator of the stage adaptation of the radio play *Stained*. Her performances, musical compositions, and sound installations have been presented in festivals nationwide, including the *Spoleto Festival USA* and the *Brooklyn Academy of Music's Next Wave Festival*. Her play *the whole wide world* was produced in the 1998 *Stenberg New Plays Festival* at *Trinity Repertory Theatre* and was directed by Peter Dubois. *the doll plays* received a workshop production at the *New World Theatre* at the University of Massachusetts, and a staged reading at the *New York Shakespeare Festival* in April 2000. Rogers received a Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing from *Brown University* (1998) and a Master of Fine Arts in Musical Theater Writing from *New York University's Tisch School of the Arts* (1995).

Peter Dubois—Director

Peter DuBois is currently the Artistic Director of Perseverance Theater in Douglas, Alaska where his directing credits include *The Seagull*, Polly Pen's *Goblin Market*, *Romeo and Juliet*, Paula Vogel's *How I Learned to Drive*, and Madeliene Olnek's *Wild Nights with Emily*. Prior to Perseverance, DuBois directed new plays for Trinity Rep (including *the whole wide world* by Alva Rogers), and spent three years in Prague where he co-founded the Asylum Performance Center. *American Theatre* magazine called him "one of the 15 theater artists under 30 who will be transforming American stages for decades to come."

Actor's Express

During its 13 year history, Actor's Express has developed and produced nine world premieres and twenty-six Southeastern premieres. The company has an excellent artistic reputation, and in 1997 the theatre was invited to become a charter member of the National New Play Network, a thirteen-theatre organization initiated by the Eugene O'Neill Theatre Center to support the development and exchange of new American plays. The new Artistic Director Wier Harman has also demonstrated a strong commitment to women playwrights of color and challenging material. During his first season he has directed Maria Irene Fornes' *Fefu and her Friends* and Suzan-Lori Parks' *The America Play*. Actors Express is also home to the annual New Black Playwrights Festival of staged readings.

The Fund for Women Artists

The Fund for Women Artists is a non-profit arts service organization dedicated to increasing the diversity and employment of women in the arts, especially women in theatre, film, and video. To accomplish these goals we provide low-cost grant-writing and other management services to artists whose work features non-traditional images of women. Although we do not provide cash grants ourselves, we have helped women obtain funds from many other sources. In our first seven years, we have raised over \$1,200,000 for women artists and women led arts organizations, and we have helped to fund eighteen plays, four films, two videos, and fifteen arts education projects. In September 2000 we received a challenge pledge of \$1 million to launch an endowment campaign.

The doll plays: crib sheet p. 1



Mrs. Lenon Holder Hoyte with some of her dolls.

Alva Rogers' *the doll plays*

the doll plays is based on the true story of Lenon Holder Hoyte, a retired African-American public school teacher who amassed one of the largest private collections of dolls and toys in the country. Mrs. Hoyte ran Aunt Len's Doll and Toy Museum in her three-story Harlem brownstone for over twenty years starting around 1970. In 1994, when her failing health forced her to dismantle the collection, 700 of her best antique dolls were auctioned at Sotheby's and over 5000 other items were dispersed to antique dealers.

Using a surrealistic, non-linear style, Rogers explores many layers of African-American experience in this piece. At its most basic level, the story is about the history of Harlem. Mrs. Hoyte was a descendant of Harlem's elite and an art teacher. She embodied a vibrant cultural tradition, and her museum was designed to teach the children of Harlem about their past and to encourage them to dream about their futures. The play critiques the racial and gender stereotypes embodied by the dolls. By depicting Mrs. Hoyte's struggle to keep the museum open as the neighborhood deteriorates around her, the play raises questions about our responsibilities to children trapped in our rapidly-changing inner cities.

the doll plays is a co-production of:

Actor's Express
887 West Marietta St. NW, Suite J-107
Atlanta, GA 30318
Phone: 404-875-1606
Website: www.actorexpress.com

The Fund for Women Artists
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17 NEW STORIES



NEWS
Atlanta's Actor's Express Premieres *Doll Plays* in 2001-02

JUN 19, 2001

A Harlem woman with her impressive collection of dolls will strut her first hours across the stage at Actor's Express in Atlanta Jan. 17-March 23, 2002. The theatre company premieres Alva Rogers' *The Doll Plays* in the upcoming 2001-02 season.

A Harlem woman with her impressive collection of dolls will strut her first hours across the stage at Actor's Express in Atlanta Jan. 17-March 23, 2002. The theatre company premieres Alva Rogers' *The Doll Plays* in the upcoming 2001-02 season.

The Doll Plays, based on the true story of a retired school teacher who amassed an extensive collection of dolls and toys in her three-story brownstone, is the most recent play from Rogers whose works include *the bride who became frightened when she saw life open* and *the life before/reconstruction /reconstructing whiteness*. The world premiere of *The Doll Plays* runs in repertory with the southeastern premiere of Thomas Gibbon's *Bee-Luther-Hatchee*, a drama about an African-American book editor's search for an elusive author who penned an award-winning story of segregation in the South.

Billed as a comedy reminiscent of Dylan Thomas and James Joyce, Glen Berger's latest *The Wooden Breeks* visits a "Brigadoon-gone-bad" where the residents take full advantage of the Victorian fear of being buried alive ("wooden breeks" being slang for coffin). *The Wooden Breeks*, which recently

os://www.playbill.com ed Los Angeles' Open Fist Theatre and at Actor's Express, in a co-production with Juncos' Resurgence Theatre. It runs April 4-May 11, 2002

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The Ballard Institute Presents THE DOLL PLAYS Reunion Fall Online Puppet Forum

This forum is co-sponsored by the UConn Department of Art and Art History and Africana Studies Institute.

by A.A. Cristi Oct. 29, 2021



For its second installment of the 2021 Fall Puppet Forum Series, and in conjunction with its Puppetry's Racial Reckoning exhibition, the Ballard Institute and Museum of Puppetry at the University of Connecticut will host "The Doll Plays" Reunion with Alva Rogers, **Heather Henson**, and Holly Laws on Thursday, Nov. 4 at 7 p.m. ET.

This forum will take place on Zoom (registration required: us06web.zoom.us/webinar/register/WN_ewzeFqjpTDa0lcZCbOURSg) and Facebook Live (facebook.com/BallardInstitute/) and will be available afterwards on Facebook and the Ballard Institute YouTube Channel (youtube.com/channel/UC3VSthEDnYS6ZjOwzT1DnTg).

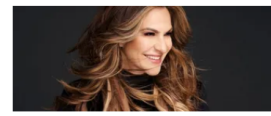
This forum is co-sponsored by the UConn Department of Art and Art History and Africana Studies Institute.

Playwright Alva Rogers based The Doll Plays on the true story of African American doll collector Lenon Holder Hoyte (1905-1999) and her museum in Harlem. When she passes, the dolls in Ms. Hoyte's collection seek to keep their beloved museum founder alive in their world by transforming her into a doll. "The Doll Plays" Reunion brings together the creative team of the original production: director **Heather Henson**, playwright Alva Rogers, and artist Holly Laws, to discuss The Doll Plays' historical and cultural context, their experience of creating the play, and its relevance today. Shadow puppets made by artist Kara Walker which featured

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Ballet of the dolls: The premiere of the doll plays explores Harlem's changing soul--and challenges Atlanta audiences. (Critic's Notebook).

Link/Page Citation

Pink and white--the colors of a little girl's dream dollhouse--create an atmosphere that is soft, warm and inviting. Gossamer drapes and fine shining wires define the space. At the center is the bed we all wished we had when we were 12--a canopied four-poster, draped in white eiderdown.

This cozy environment, apparently suspended in the air and washed by the sounds of a jazz band, nestled at the heart of Alva Rogers's the doll plays, a daring fantasy-meets-memory play that received its world premiere at Atlanta's Actor's Express this past March. Written in blank-verse for a cast of 14, Rogers's work is based on the life of Mrs. Lenon Holder Hoyte--a former public schoolteacher who, from 1970 to 1994, ran Aunt Len's Doll and Toy Museum for the children of Harlem, filling it with thousands of dolls she'd bought or restored or rescued. In the play--set at the moment of Aunt Len's death, which takes place in that comfortable four-poster--the dolls draw their owner into their world, promising to "give her doll eyes, a doll heart, a doll soul, give her doll hair... keep her forever in our world," rather than give her up to the progression of death, dust, burial and loss.

Part II

Keyword Title Author Topic

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A daughter of the early 20th-century Harlem elite, Aunt Len grew to see her beloved New York neighborhood deteriorate, besieged by poverty and crime--and she fought back by creating an island of love and beauty in the basement of the brownstone where she lived alone after her husband's death. Rogers's drama introduces 12 of Len's treasured toys: a pair of 18th-century baby dolls, one white and one black; a 19th-century French fashion doll, curled, flounced and fringed within an inch of her life; a doll made by Izannah Walker, one of America's earliest female dollmakers; a set of four antebellum rag dolls in motherdaughter pairs, one white, one black; a 1950s commemorative Grace Kelly doll in a royal wedding gown; a Thomas Edison soldier whose white skin has been carefully painted brown by some long-ago black parent; and, finally, Len's favorite, Brown Nurse Doll, who takes her hand as she dies.

These collectibles tell their stories in their own vividly individual voices, yielding periodically to their owner's reminiscences about her life and the changing face of Harlem. Ambitious though the play's blank verse and nonlinear form may be, the doll plays are far from inaccessible. As Peter DuBois, who directed the Actor's Express production, observes: "Alva's verse opens up every moment's emotional content in a way that lets the listener have the verse 'disappear' and the truth come through transparently." For her part, the playwright says the heart, not the intellect, governed her choice of an experimental form. Audiences, she insists, are able to "jump on board a non-naturalistic piece of writing, as long as they are given a point of access whereby they can follow the logic a writer has constructed."

Keyword Title Author Topic

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ROGERS BEGAN CONSTRUCTING THAT

logic while a graduate student in creative writing at Brown University, where she worked with puppeteer Heather Henson (daughter of Jim Henson of Muppet fame) and visual artists Holly Laws and Kara Walker, who contributed to Rogers's thesis production of the doll plays. After the playwright graduated, the piece was workshopped at New World Theater, in Amherst, Mass., and at the Public Theater's New Work Now festival in New York. While in the Big Apple, Rogers joined the playwrights' project at Women's Project & Productions, finding an ally in artistic associate Suzanne Bennett, who connected Rogers to the Fund for Women Artists--a seven-year-old initiative that aims to increase the diversity and employment of women in theatre, video and film by providing low-cost grant-writing, fiscal management and project-planning services to help women raise funds from other sources.

At that point, the playwright approached DuBois, who had directed the New Work Now workshop and who is the artistic director of Perseverance Theatre in Juneau, Alaska. Realizing that the large, multi-ethnic cast the script requires would be prohibitively expensive to import to his own theatre, DuBois brought the play to the attention of his friend Wier Harman, artistic director of Actor's Express: Harman recognized a brilliant opportunity for his company's acting interns to do significant work onstage; under DuBois's direction, the ensemble cast would, in fact, develop a physical performance style that illuminated not only the dolls' personalities but also their physical characteristics--whether they were centuries old or brand new, were made of bisque or of rags, represented children or adults.

Author Topic

Part IV

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Audiences for the doll plays have proved to be extremely diverse, and also younger, on average, than the viewers who usually attend Actor's Express--a winning combination for any theatre. Ultimately, the audience was perhaps the project's crucial ingredient--the teamwork and developmental efforts would have come to naught had not the audience been willing to leap into a narratively daring drama. The snug, pink bedroom that cradled the doll plays, it turned out, was a frontier to a theatrical adventure.

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