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Black Women Triumph in *Tina*, *colored girls*

David Sheward · Wednesday, November 13th, 2019

Nowhere is the contrast between today's Broadway and Off-Broadway more sharply defined than in the productions of *Tina: The Tina Turner Musical* at the Lunt-Fontanne and the revival of Ntozake Shange's 1976 groundbreaking *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf*, Off-Broadway at the Public Theater.



Adrienne Warren (center) in *Tina: The Tina Turner Musical*.

Credit: Manuel Harlan

Both give glorious voice to African-American women dealing with sexist and racial oppression, but they could not be more different in their production history, form and delivery. *Tina* is a sleek jukebox musical, spectacularly entertaining but made from a cookie cutter template, arriving on Broadway as a pre-sold commodity after a smash run in London, aided by the public's familiarity with Turner's inspiring story through her autobiography and the 1993 film *What's Love Got to Do with It*.

Colored girls defies category and eschews plot, blending poetry, storytelling, movement and music to explore issues of identity, sexuality, and liberation among seven women identified only by the color of their costumes (designed with flair and individuality by Toni-Leslie James). The choreopoem—a form invented by Shange and attempted by few if any subsequent playwrights—began life in a woman's bar in Berkeley, California. Reworked versions played the New Federal and Public Theaters before moving to Broadway for a Tony-winning run of 742 performances. Shange was only the second African-American woman to have a play produced on Broadway (Lorraine Hansberry being the first with *A Raisin in the Sun* and *The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window*.) *Girls* was later filmed for TV and the movies. The play has been an iconic hallmark of feminist theater but would such a radical work by a new non-white, non-male author make it on the Broadway of today?



Adrienne Warren and Daniel J. Watts in *Tina: The Tina Turner Musical*.

Credit: Manuel Harlan

Katori Hall, one of the few black women playwrights since Hansberry and Shange to see their work on the Great White Way, is the author of *Tina*'s book (along with Frank Ketelaar and Kees Prins). Interestingly, jukebox musicals have become a rare income source for writing women of

color. Dominique Morisseau authored *Ain't Too Proud: The Life and Times of the Temptations* and two-time Pulitzer Prize winner Lynn Nottage penned the libretto for the upcoming *MJ*, the Michael Jackson musical.

Tina's raw material bears a striking resemblance to the stories of Carole King and Cher and, to a lesser extent, Donna Summer, music stars whose lives have also been Broadway-ized. Turner, like King and Cher, was a phenomenally talented performer "discovered" at a young age by a domineering male who provided her with the platform to shine, then married and abused her (though Gerry Goffin and Sonny Bono did not physically abuse their wives as Ike Turner did to Tina). Like the other legendary ladies, Tina eventually left her toxic spouse, and after setbacks, outshone him in a blazing career transformation.

Hall's economic script and Phyllida Lloyd's fluid direction acknowledge that this is a familiar story, albeit a true one, and move us quickly to what audiences want to see—the extraordinary Adrienne Warren channeling but not imitating Turner in a series of heart-stopping production numbers of the subject's hits such as "Better Be Good to Me," "Private Dancer," and, of course, "Proud Mary." Mark Thompson's flexible sets and costumes help make transitions swiftly and smoothly. Hall and her collaborators do not shoehorn in the songs, as was the case with the campy *Mamma Mia*, another jukebox tuner also directed by Lloyd. Here the placements mostly make sense and illustrate key moments in Turner's journey, such as when she gives "River Deep, Mountain High" a centered resonance during a solo recording session, establishing herself outside of Ike's influence.



Steven Booth and Adrienne Warren in *Tina: The Tina Turner Musical*.

Credit: Manuel Harlan

Warren captures the essence of Turner's growly, sexy stage personae vocally and in movement (Anthony Van Laast created the kinetic choreography). She also gives an explosively real account of Turner's fiery determination to survive and triumph over the physical and emotional assaults of the dangerously volatile Ike (Daniel J. Watts in an equally layered turn) and the indifference of a fickle music business. As of now, Warren is the leading contender for a Best Musical Actress Tony. Dawnn Lewis exudes anger and frustrated love as Tina's withholding mother, Myra Lucretia Taylor balances with maternal warmth as the grandmother, and Skye Dakota Turner is a tiny explosion of talent as young Tina. *Tina* may be one of many jukebox musicals, but it's definitely among the best of the genre.



The cast of *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf*.

Credit: Joan Marcus

As noted, *for colored girls* defies genre and Leah C. Gardner's joyful production is equally difficult to pigeonhole. Part dance concert, part poetry reading, part celebration of sisterhood, this revival is a sort of community experience with audience members onstage in Myung Hee Cho's open and airy set. Gardner's energetic staging and Camille A. Brown's streetwise choreography allow the monologues and set pieces to seamlessly flow into one another.

The characters do not have names, but the vibrant cast endows each with a unique and specific personality. Sasha Allen's thrilling singing gives musical expression to the Lady in Blue's blues.

Hearing-impaired performer Alexandria Wailes provides eloquent gestures for the Lady in Purple. Celia Chevalier infuses the Lady in Brown with sass and spice as she recounts a childhood memory about an imagined love affair with the Haitian revolutionary hero Toussaint L’Overture. Danaya Esperanza’s Lady in Orange dances with verve in a tribute to Latin movement. Okwui Okpokwasili gives full vent to the Lady in Green’s demands to get her emotional and psychological “stuff” back from a former romantic partner. Adrienne C. Moore is exuberant and bubbly as the Lady in Yellow who relives her sexual initiation during a high-school graduation party. Jayme Lawson’s Lady in Red gets to deliver the emotional centerpiece of the evening, a harrowing account of a psychotic Vietnam veteran destroying his estranged lover’s life. She does so with heartbreakingly vivid passion, but the other pieces of this colorful, moving mosaic are just as vivid.

Tina: The Tina Turner Musical: Opened Nov. 7 for an open run. Lunt-Fontanne Theatre, 205 W. 46th St., NYC. Tue 7pm, Wed 2pm & 8pm, Thu 7pm, Fri 8pm, Sat 2pm & 8pm, Sun 3pm. Running time: two hours and 45 mins. including intermission. \$179—\$519. (877) 250-2929. www.ticketmaster.com.

for colored girls: Oct. 22—Dec. 8. Tue—Fri 8pm, Sat—Sun 2pm & 8pm. Public Theater, 425 Lafayette St., NYC. Running time: 90 mins. with no intermission. (212) 967-7555. www.publictheater.org.

This review previously appeared on Theaterlife.com.

This entry was posted on Wednesday, November 13th, 2019 at 9:59 am and is filed under [Theatre](#), [Music](#)

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